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# Reflections on the Allen C. Davis Collection of African Art

Ann-Veronique Romain

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**Reflections on the  
Allen C. Davis  
Collection of African Art**

Developed by Ann-Véronique Romain

## **Acknowledgments**

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Thanks also to my husband Benoit for his great support and his critic reading.

## **About the author**

Ann-Véronique Romain is a Graduate Student at ISU. She graduated in 1991 at the Université de Haute Alsace, Mulhouse, France, with a Master, and then in 1992 with a Diplome D'Etudes Approfondies, both in Comparative Literature. She taught Humanities in High School and College in France before moving to Ames, where she volunteers at the Brunnier Museum. This guide to the Allen C. Davis Collection of African Art was developed as her Creative Component for her M.A. degree in Arts and Humanities.

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## **General Information**

### **The Allen C. Davis Collection of African Art at Iowa State**

#### **University**

#### **Ambassador Allen C. Davis**

Allen Davis is a retired U.S. Ambassador. He was a career State Department employee. He worked in different positions, as Ambassador in Uganda and in other embassy positions in different countries of Africa, including Guinea, Zaire and Upper Volta. He worked in various other parts of the world as well.

Ambassador Davis collected traditional African art wherever he traveled. He owns a collection of hundreds of pieces of sculpture and other art forms, particularly from Zaire.

In 1997, Ambassador Davis generously gave sixty-three works of African art to the Iowa State University Anthropology Department. The pieces reflect the range of his collection from different areas of the African continent.

Ambassador Davis is convinced that hands-on experience is very important for students. Therefore, the Department will use the Davis Collection as a teaching resource.

#### **The Content of the Collection**

The sixty-three objects of the Collection are listed below in categories, along with their accession numbers and their origins.

##### Mask Forms:

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| 1997.1 | Plank mask, Bwa butterfly style, Western Sudan            |
| 1997.2 | Plank mask, Mossi " <i>Karanga</i> " style, Western Sudan |

- 1997.3 Plank mask, Bobo "*Mola*" style, Western Sudan
- 1997.4 Plank mask, Bwa owl face, Western Sudan
- 1997.5 Plank mask, serpentine superstructure, Western Sudan
- 1997.6 Antelope headcrest, *Kurumba* style, Western Sudan
- 1997.7a -b Two Senufo *Kpelle*- style face masks, Western Sudan
- 1997.8 Mask with large monkey superstructure, Dogon, Western Sudan
- 1997.9 Buffalo headcrest, Bwa style, Western Sudan
- 1997.10 Bovine headcrest, Western Sudan
- 1997.11 Antelope headcrest, Bwa style, Western Sudan
- 1997.12 Dogon *Kanaga* Mask and two cross pieces, Western Sudan
- 1997.13 Western Sudan headcrest, stylized fish superstructure
- 1997.14 Bobo massive face mask with median crest, Western Sudan
- 1997.15 Vai/Gola bell-form crest (elongated neck, small head), Liberia
- 1997.16 Pende crest mask with beard, Congo
- 1997.17a-b Pair of vertical *Tyi Wara* headcrests, Mali, Western Sudan

Cast Brass Tourist Pieces:

- 1997.18 Bamun mask
- 1997.19a-d Lot of four Senufo *Kpelle* masks, Western Sudan
- 1997.20 Brass anklet, Western Sudan
- 1997.21 Brass stylized figure, Western Sudan
- 1997.22a-b Brass couple, Western Sudan
- 1997.23 Hyena, Western Sudan
- 1997.24 Leopard with prey, Western Sudan
- 1997.25a-b Two chameleons, Lobi

Wrought Iron:

- 1997.26 Standing attenuated figure, Dogon/Bamana style
- 1997.27a-c Three "*kissi pennies*" /country money, Guinea, Liberia

Wood, Figurative:

- 1997.28a-b Two Mossi or Nuna dolls, Burkina Faso
- 1997.29 Yoruba male *ibeji*, Nigeria
- 1997.30a-b Two Akan standing figures, Cote d'Ivoire
- 1997.31 "Mr. One Leg" charm, bundled, Yaka, Congo
- 1997.32 Friction oracle as elephant, Lele, Congo/Zaire

Stone figure:

- 1997.33 Soapstone figure, Sherbro, Sierra Leone

Musical Instruments:

- 1997.34a-d Four Nuna/Bwa prestige hunting whistles, Burkina Faso
- 1997.35 Balophone and beaters, Western Sudan
- 1997.36 Malinke/Bamana clapper, Mali
- 1997.37 Friction drum, Guinea Coast (possibly from Nigeria or Liberia)
- 1997.38 Pair of dance anklets with bells, Western Sudan
- 1997.39 Holo thumb piano, "*Sanza*," S. Congo

Weaving Paraphernalia:

- 1997.40a-d Two stylized female figurative heddle pulleys, Mali
- 1997.41a-b Two looms
- 1997.42 Shuttle

Hand-loomed Textiles and Garments:

- 1997.43 "Country cloth" strip-weave wheel, Liberia
- 1997.44 Prestige robe, narrow strip-weave, Liberia
- 1997.45a-b Two Bokolafini narrow strip-weave mud dye cloths, Mali
- 1997.46 Korhogo narrow strip cotton weave, painted figures, Cote d'Ivoire
- 1997.47 Shoowa/kuba prestige raffia mat ("*Kasai* velvet"), Kuba, Congo

#### Household Implements:

- 1997.48 Mug, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo
- 1997.49 Mortar, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo
- 1997.50 Box as skeumorph of basket, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo
- 1997.51a-b Basketry, Lele (?), and Two small basket sections, yaka (?)

#### Weapons:

- 1997.52 Kuba pear-shaped iron blade, wood handle
- 1997.53 Bamun sword, wood handle, fiber embellished sheath and straps, Cameroon
- 1997.54 Pende chief's staff as spear, Congo/Zaire
- 1997.55 Spear for hunting hippo, Uganda

#### Miscellaneous:

- 1997.56 Dogon granary door, Mali
- 1997.57 Akan comb
- 1997.58 Slingshot as stylized ram, Gouro (?)
- 1997.59 "House of head," shrine of cloth, leather, cowry shells, Yoruba, Nigeria
- 1997.60a-c Beadwork: Tutsi narrow headband and two strands

### **Using the Collection as a Teaching Tool**

The Collection, following Ambassador Davis' wish, is a teaching resource.

The following booklet addresses both faculty and students in anthropology, and the larger context of the humanities.

### **Use for the Faculty**

The booklet is designed to serve as a professor's teaching resource. Professors will be able to use it as an outline or use the exercises as an interactive tool with their students. The objects can be used as visual media to compare cultures in general or one particular aspect of a culture (ex., rituals, fashion etc.). One object can be studied alone or in connection with others (according to one common topic or function or to a region).

We deliberately broke the paragraphs down to make it easier to read. The format is consistent with that of a quick reference learning guide.

### **Use for the Students**

The objects and written information should be used to encourage students' reflection, not only to provide factual descriptions of the objects. The exercises should provide enough material to open a broader discussion (ex., interaction of one particular object with history, culture, function, etc.). It is not necessary to specify which parts of the Guide are addressed to a specific audience (each professor can use the objects and topics according to the level required by the class). Major emphasis, however, will be on the undergraduate level.

### **Supplementary Documentation**

Additional documentation on the same topic: suggested supplementary readings (for both faculty and students), bibliographical sources for further research on the topic, as well as slides and suggested films will be provided after each topic.

### **Involving Students with the Collection**

1. The objects can serve to illustrate specific lecture topics or as discussion topics in class.
2. Most of the objects in the Collection are intended to be hands-on objects (unless otherwise specified): they can be handled in class for closer examination. Involve the students in handling the objects in museum circumstances, with specific white gloves (see the Department). Encourage the students to work in groups with the objects.

3. Students in groups or as individuals can work on research topics with the objects.



## **The Nature of African Art**

The Davis Collection is constituted of African art objects gathered by Ambassador Davis during his career in Africa. Not all the categories described in the following presentation of the different forms of African art are represented in the Collection.

The Collection includes art objects coming exclusively from the Sub-Saharan art area. Therefore the term "African art" used in this handbook does not involve other African art areas.

### **Indigenous Art Forms in Africa**

#### Woodcarving:

This activity is restricted to men. For the outsider, sculpture is the most visible art form in Africa. The carver needs different sizes of adzes and knives and works around the piece. First, he cuts a general form using the adzes. The initial mass is then divided into smaller masses. After smoothing, the carver uses knives to cut fine details. The sculpture is then smoothed and can be painted. In this guide we will focus on the sculptural pieces and woodcarving will be used to develop several parts: The Mask: Topic Two; Gender Issues: Topic Six; and Family and Kinship: Topic Seven, are some examples.

Other sculpting techniques apply also to bone ivory or stone.

#### Ceramics:

Hand-made ceramic vessels are created by using one of three different techniques: direct pull (the clay is stretched upwards), inverted mold (clay is stretched over a pot serving as a mold), and concave mold (clay stretched inside a pot or a simple hole in the ground). The potter's wheel appeared in South Africa only in the twentieth century. Ceramic pieces are decorated with stamps and incised or pressed designs. The surface can be polished or scraped. The pots are fired and sometimes glazed with a vegetable-based solution. Sometimes, figurative sculpture is also made of clay.

### Painting:

There is no traditional canvas painting (this has become a new African art form in the twentieth century), but other mediums are used: the human body, house walls, cloth, vessels and sculpture can be painted. Black, white and red pigments are commonly applied with sticks or feathers.

African art uses also yellow and ocher earth pigments, and indigo blue. These last three colors are regarded as variants of the basic triad.

Organic materials provide some of the pigments (depending on the surface to be colored):

White: kaolin clay

Red: guinea corn stalk, various berries, laterite soil, tree bark

Black: leaves, roots, charcoal, iron.

The natural pigments are pounded, soaked and boiled. The artist may add varied substances to make liquid paint (water, resin or oil).

Contemporary materials providing pigments:

Beginning in the colonial period, artists use more imported enamel paints, watercolor or imported colorfast dyes. They even use shoe polish and floor wax.

### Leatherworking:

In North Africa, the tanning is done by women. Elsewhere, men work with leather. The skins can be painted, embroidered or decorated with appliqué motifs. Other decorative techniques include impression, incision or peeling.

### Basketry:

The technique is similar to weaving. Basketry is used in vessels, storage and transport, mats, shields or costumes for masquerades.

### Buildings/architecture:

The main material used here is mud, molded into bricks and dried, packed in the interstices provided by tied branches, or assembled with the same technique as pottery coiling (if the building is rounded).

### Textiles:

Raw cotton is spun into yarn for weaving by both men and women. The gender roles in production will be discussed in Topic Six: Gender Issues. The textiles and yarns may be dyed with indigo or other vegetable dyes and embroidered or decorated with appliqué. Textiles and Clothing, Topic Five, will discuss some aspects of African weaving techniques.

### Metal work:

Gold and silver, especially for jewelry or prestige paraphernalia and leadership regalia.

Iron: the blacksmith in some parts of Africa is also the wood carver. He produces ritual objects in both art forms, but also iron tools and weapons. An example of iron art is used in Topic Four: Power, Prestige, Politic.

Brass, bronze, copper casting: brass is the most commonly used throughout Africa. Casting is made with the metallic elements available in the different areas of Africa. The metal alloy is cast with the lost wax technique (or “cire perdue”). A clay form is covered with wax. To create an image, this layer is covered with clay to create a mold. Once dry, the clay mold is heated to melt the wax. Melted brass or copper can then be poured into the clay mold, which will be broken off after cooling. Examples of brass sculptures are used in Topic Eight: Change Processes.

## **A Bit of Geography**

### Maps of Africa:

These maps show the political and stylistic aspects of the continent. Some countries have changed their name over the last years.

The maps may be copied and handed out to students. The style map can be used throughout the topics for a quick visual reminder of the origin of the object that is observed.

The style map locates the different stylistic areas developed on the additional document by Dr. N. Wolff.



Countries and Capitals of Africa



Stylistic Areas of Africa

# Stylistic Characteristics of African Sculpture

## WESTERN SUDAN ART AREA

Representative ethnic groups: West (Mande languages): Bambara, Baga, Marka. East (Voltaic languages): Mossi, Dogon, Bobo, Senufo, Kurumba.

### General art characteristics:

1. Fairly homogeneous style throughout area
2. Use soft wood
3. Larger and more abstract (geometric) forms than other art areas
4. Finishes - natural wood, charred carbonized wood, or painted (red, black, white most common)
5. Finely incised geometric decoration common

### Figurative Sculpture:

1. Elongated body
2. Arms separated from body
3. Arms and body depicted as three parallel cylinders
4. Legs with knees flexed and feet well apart
5. Relatively smaller heads than other art areas
6. Head keeled (ridge at crown of head front to back)
7. Some pierced forms, negative space important

### Masks: (3 basic types - face, crest, horizontal)

1. Horizontal helmet masks depicting animals (throughout area)
2. Face masks with superstructures, very abstract with painted and/or incised geometric patterning (East)
3. Face masks without superstructures, more naturalistic, natural wood or

carbonized surface with additive elements of metal or natural objects (West)

## GUINEA COAST ART AREA

Representative ethnic groups: East (Mande languages): Dan, Baule, Mende, Temne, Guro. West (Kwa languages): Ashanti, Yoruba, Benin.

### General art characteristics: (compared to Western Sudan)

1. Smaller in scale
2. Preference for relatively naturalistic organic forms; less lineal
3. Little purely geometric decoration
4. Variety of media - wood, stone, clay, ivory, brass, gold
5. Wood sculpture finished with highly polished black surface in West, multicolor finish in East
6. Naturalistic leadership arts present in East

### Figurative Sculpture:

1. Attempt to depict idealized human physical beauty
2. Typical African 3:1 body proportions; bodies less elongated; large heads relative to body size
3. Rounded body and limb forms
4. Arms held close to body, often touching the body to give a closed outline
5. Great care taken in detailed incising or raised markings to indicate elaborate hairstyles and body scarification patterns

### Masks: (3 basic types - face, helmet, crest)

1. Depiction of human, rather than animal forms, most common
2. Less emphasis on vertical superstructures

3. Small face masks that cover only the face, with smooth black surfaces and additive elements (West)
4. Multicolored painted face, helmet and crest masks (East)

## EQUATORIAL FOREST ART AREA

Representative ethnic groups: Niger River Basin: Urhobo, Ibo, Ibibio, Ijaw, Ekoi. Cameroon Grasslands: Bamileke, Bafum. Ogowe River Basin: Fang, Kota, Kwele, Kuyu. Upper Zaire River Basin: Bembe, Lega, Mangbetu, Azande.

### General art characteristics:

1. Difficult to make stylistic generalizations for whole area.
2. Relative naturalistic human forms
3. Preference for natural wood finishes or painted (white with black and red accents)
4. More variation in mask styles than figurative sculpture

### Figurative Sculpture:

1. Bulging or rounded muscles
2. Limbs pinched in at joints
3. Upper arms parallel to body with elbows bent
4. Often hands are placed on each side of navel or extended toward front
5. Niger River Basin & Cameroon Grasslands; relatively naturalistic body proportions; Ogowe & Upper Zaire River Basins: typical 3:1 body proportions.

### Masks: (3 major types - face, helmet, crest)

1. Painted face masks, naturalistic human faces common
2. White faces with black or red accents common



3. Helmet and crest masks in Niger River basin & Cameroon Grasslands
4. Heart-shaped faces with concave face area and browlines connecting at nose, extending around cheek area and ending at mouth or below. Particularly common in Ogowe River area
5. Unique skin-covered naturalistic masks in Niger River Basin

## SOUTHERN SAVANNA ART AREA

Representative ethnic groups: Teke, Bembe, Kongo, Suku, Yaka, Chokwe, Pende, Kuba, Lulua, Songye, Luba.

### General Art Characteristics:

1. Great stylistic variety
2. Basically naturalistic forms
3. Emphasis on raised or incised surface decoration
4. Highly decorative utilitarian objects common, geometric or natural forms

### Figurative Sculpture:

1. In comparison to other areas, less emphasis on frontality, symmetry and immobility, i.e. figures sometimes shown in action
2. Complex patterns of raised scarification patterns on body
3. Cavity often carved in body for insertion of magical ingredients
4. Natural wood finish common

### Masks: (1 major type - face)

1. Face masks
2. Basically naturalistic depictions of human faces, but throughout area show great stylistic variation from extreme abstraction to naturalism
3. Painted - often with white, black and red

# Teaching with the Collection: a Selection of Topics

## Topic One: Cross-Cultural Aesthetics

### **Major Focus: the Nature of Aesthetics**

How to Approach an Art Object

Western Aesthetics

African Aesthetics

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

Definitions

### **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

### **Using the Davis Collection**

The *Ibeji* Figure

### **Connections to Other Topics**

### **Additional Documentation**

### **Supplementary Readings**

### **Bibliography**

### **Major Focus: the Nature of Aesthetics**

#### **How to approach an art object**

To fully understand an art object, we must consider it in three major steps:

1. **Description** of its formal attributes
2. Consideration of its **cultural context**
3. Aesthetic response and **evaluation**

These approaches to analyzing the art object can be applied to the observation of all kinds of artworks.

**Description** starts with the first look at an object, the simple factual and physical description of it.

It should be described in terms of:

1. Size
2. Shape
3. Colors
4. Surface textures and characteristics
5. Subject matter
6. Volume
7. Medium
8. Materials used
9. Technique(s)
10. Two- or three-dimensional aspect

Anyone can give a judgment on how an object appeals. However, this judgment should be seen as temporary.

We have to consider additional information on **cultural context**:

1. The object's cultural background and function (which may be available only through research).
2. The viewer's own cultural context and beliefs.
3. The time period in which the object was made, as well as the time period in which it is observed.

The second step is the more interpretative one. We have to use the context, draw upon the culture in which the object has been created, in order to understand why and how it has been created. This second step should reveal the function of the artwork.

The third step, **personal evaluation**, is the most personal one. It involves one's personal emotional and aesthetical reactions to art. It addresses the idea of meaning.

Evaluation is particular to every person, but it can serve as a great mediator for discussing new or foreign art forms, as in the case of the Davis Collection.

The three steps to understand an artwork are important to take individually and separately, for they open up a progression in one's aesthetic appreciation. As we go through these steps, we move **from a relatively objective explanation** based on fundamental information and analysis of form and cultural context **to an informed subjective judgment** involving individual feelings. By the time we reach the third step, we are aware that art forms of other cultures cannot be judged according to "good," "bad" or "wrong" as defined by Western criteria.

As we can see, to look at art is necessarily to be confronted by aesthetics. Aesthetics is one way to approach art. Since we will use a collection of African art objects, it is indispensable to understand what is considered aesthetic in both the Western and the African cultures.

## Western aesthetics

### Origins:

The Western concept of "art" goes back to Graeco-Roman **Antiquity**. Greek philosophers, including Socrates, Aristotle and Plato are considered the founders of aesthetics. The etymology of the word is the Greek word *aisthesis*, which means "sensitvity" (with a double meaning of both perception and sensitivity in the perception). The **canons** were decided in Antiquity and have been used throughout Europe since the Renaissance and then spread to the Americas when Europeans colonized the New World. Western aesthetics uses canons of "**Beauty**" and the idea of the "**Ideal**" to describe art.

Several factors determine the concept of aesthetics as tied to art in the Western view (Merriam 1964: 260):

1. "Psychical distance": the consideration has to be made from the exterior. The observation has to be removed from the context of meaning
2. Art is often created for its own sake
3. Art produces emotions and reactions
4. Art is qualified positively (use of the word "beautiful")
5. Something aesthetic is created on purpose

6. Western culture has developed a philosophy of the aesthetics that must be learned

Art became the creation of an **artist**, and even a **consumable product**. The artist has become very important in Western culture, for he or she represents the creative process. We buy and commission art and assign a specific special status to the artist. In the West, art has become more and more an indispensable consumer good.

#### Aesthetic: a concept created by and for Western art

Here lies an important problem: we are most likely to reveal our **ethnocentrism** when we are expressing aesthetic judgments. **Aesthetic tastes are culture-bound**. In addition, it has always been the case that the knowledge of Western aesthetics is claimed by a small group of experts. These people are trained in the arts and aesthetics, according to theories developed and taught for centuries by and for an audience of "white European males." This opens up a whole new dimension of the notion of ethnocentrism. This male-centered history will become particularly important when we discuss the representation of the female body in Topic Six: Gender Issues.

#### The Nineteenth Century

Aesthetics became even more important when Europe discovered Egyptian civilization. They discovered that Graeco-Roman Antiquity was not the "cradle of civilization" anymore, and that there were other seminal civilizations in the world.

Persuaded of their supremacy, European nations colonized countries all over the world. They encountered new forms of art, and suddenly the value of Western aesthetics took on a new meaning. Westerners began to **compare** their own art to the ones belonging to other cultures. By comparing, they were forced to make judgments. They used the first and third steps to observe art (description and evaluation) but they failed to develop the second one (cultural context).

They imposed their notion of "progress" on the rest of the world. Industrialization became the reference point for classifying other cultures. The "superior culture" is Western because of its progress in technology. This idea of superior and inferior cultures not only applied to social organization or industry, but also was used to consider art. The notion of aesthetics became a tool to **classify art into "primitive" or "civilized."**

### The ethnocentric term “primitive”:

This word is not used anymore to refer to cultures or art because of its subjective, restrictive and racist implications. The term “primitive” is **prejudicial and ethnocentric**. It has been used by Westerners in the past to classify what they considered “lower quality” art (compared to their own art). Primitive art applied to the idea of childish, **unrefined and rudimentary**. It was an attempt to assimilate foreign forms of art to the Western system, ruled by an evolutionary and diffusionist point of view. Based on the assumption that Western civilization was superior because of political and economical progress, all other cultures were considered primitive, as well as their art. The term was used for over a century. Today, the term “primitive” is **not used anymore** by anthropologists and art historians who study the arts of small-scale societies.

### **African aesthetics**

The first encounter between European and African art was biased by empirical assumptions about what “fine arts” had to be. Since the Renaissance, Western art has been representational and naturalistic.

After the modern evolution of more abstract art forms, beginning with Impressionism, the Western eye opened to new stylized forms. The first European artists interested in African art belonged to the Avant-Garde at the beginning of the twentieth century (Picasso, Braque, Derain). They helped to consider African art as an aesthetic statement, on the same level as Western art, because the Avant-Garde school was breaking the preconceived ideas about art, derived from centuries of tradition, and was looking at African art as a source of innovation.

### Art and anthropology:

Since anthropologists started to be interested in African art, there has been an evolution in the Western view of African aesthetics. The arts of non-western people were of interest to anthropology since its beginning. **Franz Boas**, father of anthropology in the United States, wrote the first textbook, *Primitive Art*, in the 1920s.

From that time, American anthropologists have focused on the **connections between art and the other aspects of culture**. This led to today’s study of African art, using both art history and anthropology. The idea of aesthetics has evolved into

a broader concept, and we realize that each culture has its own set of aesthetic values.

Some characteristics in African art:

Geographically, each area has its own traditional style, but there are **cross-cultural influences**, carried for example by artists or religious persons moving to a different area. (For more information on different style areas, see the introduction).

There are style areas where the similarities in cultures and religion have led to similar expressions in art.

When we look at African art, we have to keep in mind that the notion of aesthetics in Africa involves more than formal attributes, which are the focus of Western aesthetics. Once again, we have to follow each of the three steps of observation.

At first sight, African art seems to follow almost the same pattern as required traditionally in Western art:

1. In African aesthetics, **decorated objects** seem to be considered the most appealing to one's aesthetic sensitivity.
2. **Formal codes** define different types of art as they do in the Western canons. For example, in the case of sculpture, straightness and symmetry are values shared cross-culturally.
3. There are basically **two styles**: naturalistic and abstract.

The hyena (lot # 1997.20) or the two Akan figures (# 1997.25) - among others - are examples of naturalistic styles (Davis Collection).

The Bobo "Mola" style plank mask (# 1997.3) or the Dogon Kanaga mask (# 1997.12) -among others- are examples of an abstract style (Davis Collection).

4. In figurative sculpture, features normally tend to be **stylized**, and there is no need for naturalistic proportions. The Yoruba *ibeji* figure in the Davis Collection is a typical example of unnaturalistic proportions: two-third head and one-third body.

These notions are not too remote from some notions of Western art after all, but the **purpose and meaning** of the objects do not follow the Western perspective. Here we

have to consider the cultural context to understand how the aesthetics of African art is tied to the underlying functions of African art.

#### Aesthetic values and statements:

African art forms tend to emphasize the **skill of the artist**. In **sculpture**, the artist is normally a male with a specific status and is regarded as a professional. Often, patrons associated with leadership are very important, because they can control particular art forms and artists. Aesthetic value of an art form increases the **prestige** of the patron as well as the prestige of the skilled artist. **Social and religious associations** also make aesthetic statements when they order a specific object for ceremonies, shrines or masquerades (masks or ritual costumes).

Art, in Africa, is not produced to fit the "Ideal" as defined in the Western expression of art for art's sake. Westerners consider the object alone. In Africa, art is inseparable from everyday and ritual life. **African Art is art for life's sake.**

In the West, one of the main characteristics of an art object is that it can be observed and admired out of any context; it becomes the Ideal. Westerners put art into museums, and objects become "**Objet d'Art.**"

In African art, the aesthetic is expressed inside **specific cultural contexts**. It has a **function**, intimately linked to its **meaning**. Moreover, the function and meaning change for each object. Art as seen in a museum serves no purpose other than as focus of aesthetic appreciation. Both the Western and African aesthetics incorporate an **immediate affective or emotional reaction**. But the context of the reaction, what creates it and why it takes place, are different.

#### The designation of art:

**The language used to describe art** is extensive and applies not only to the object itself but also to its context (skill of the carver, value of the object, function, etc.). The Yoruba of Southwest, for example, have an extensive vocabulary to discuss the aesthetics of a sculpture (see the characteristics below, in "Using the Davis Collection").



### Colors:

The expression of African art, no matter what form it takes (sculpture, body painting, etc.), is often **polychrome**. The traditional decoration follows the color triad of white, red, and black.

**The symbolism of colors** may vary locally, but the three basic ones share a basic cross-cultural meaning in Africa:

1. **White** is associated with the idea of being pure, spiritual, liminal and referring to the afterlife.
2. **Red** symbolizes blood, “blood of birth,” power, danger. It evokes the process of transformation. (This idea may be represented by the black color in some regions).
3. Generally, **black** represents broader ideas, like fertile soils. By contrast it also represents death.

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

African art does not follow the strict criteria defined by the traditional Western point of view (as discussed previously) and its classical canons; therefore, African art could not be considered aesthetic in the past. Traditionally, aesthetics were a part of Western art history, therefore everything was observed according to the traditions of Western culture, and all other forms of art (coming from other cultures) were criticized using the same system.

### Western “fine arts” and African art:

Concepts of Western art did not apply only to three-dimensional objects or to paintings, but also to music, dance or literature. All these categories followed specific criteria implying perfection in terms of aesthetics. Therefore, they were called “Fine Arts.”

For a long time, African art was **judged only by** one form of artistic expression: **sculpture**. In the European point of view, African culture did not provide examples of all the traditional Western forms of fine art:

1. They did **not produce canvas paintings**.

2. Africans were called “savages,” considered to be a lower stage in human evolution, according to the evolutionist theories of the time period, seeing “civilization” as the stage of perfection. African culture was based on an **oral tradition** and therefore had no written literature (another “prestigious” Western art form).
3. Early Western contact with African rituals was influenced by **missionary doctrines**. In the eyes of the missionaries, Africans were not considered Christians, but “evil.” Their religious arts were considered to be “fetishes.” It was assumed that **no acceptable traditional religious art form** (and thus no real fine arts) could be produced by pagan people.
4. In Africa, **dance** (another traditional Western art form) was considered only as a manifestation of savagery.

These are some of the reasons why African art (or any “non-Western” art form) was long called **primitive** and could not fit in the same category of aesthetic values as Western art. Keep in mind this idea of **subjective and ethnocentric** comparison when doing the exercise with the Yoruba *ibeji* figure.

## Definitions

### Aesthetics:

Philosophical theory dealing with taste and pertaining to a sense or love of beauty in nature and art. It addresses the world of emotions and sensitivity.

### Art:

This definition has to be considered from two viewpoints - the Western and the African:

1. In the Western point of view, “art” refers to the production and expression of objects or music or literature (collectively called fine arts) that follow culturally defined aesthetic criteria. There is also the idea that art intensifies our awareness of the surrounding world and speaks to our emotions. It provides a feeling of pleasure, i.e. an aesthetic response. Style and artistic skill are appreciated. Art is not necessarily functional.

2. In the African point of view all of the above statements, with the exception of the last, can be applied cross-culturally, although perceived and expressed differently. The main difference is expressed in the fact that African art is closely tied to its function. Art must also address both the effectiveness of the art form and the expression of being “good.” In many cases, moreover, the emotion expressed is “awe” rather than “beauty.” “Awe” is based on the knowledge of the supernatural powers contained in the object.

It is also important to note that a lot of African cultures have no specific word for “art.”

## **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

### Questions for Discussions in the Classroom

1. Try to find an appropriate cross-cultural definition of “aesthetic.”

Why isn't it easy to find one?

Suggestion: it could be interesting to do this exercise in two phases:

- Ask the students to answer the above question before developing this topic.
- Ask the same question after comparing the Western and African aesthetics in class. It should be interesting to compare the points of view.

2. Read the definitions of “art” by anthropologists and art historians on non-Western art (see separate documentation before “Using the Davis Collection,” pp. 31-33):

Which definitions appear to fit cross-cultural perspectives the best?

(The pages with the definitions can be photocopied and handed out to the class).

3. Give your impressions about the following Western quotations about "art":

How appropriate are these statements, considering first Western Art, then African art?

- "Art is not an end in itself, but a means of addressing humanity." - Mussorgsky.
- "Art is a lie that makes us see the truth." - Picasso.
- "All art consists in bringing something into existence." - Aristotle.
- "No kind of good art exists unless it grows out of the idea of the average man." - G. K. Chesterton.

Suggested Exercises

1. Choose two pieces or more from the Davis Collection:

- Ask students which object appeals to them most. Explain why.
- Which appears to be a better example of "Art"? Why?

Suggested choices of objects:

Objects from various materials and meanings:

- Vai/Gola bell-form helmet mask, Liberia, accession # 1997.15.

Elements of reflection after observation: the mask represents a beautiful woman. The rings on the neck are considered beautiful. Is this an appealing figure?

- Bamun mask, accession # 1997.18.

Elements of reflection after observation: this is a mask produced for the tourist market; indigenous people would not use it in rituals.

- Soapstone figure, Sherbro, accession # 1997.33

Elements of reflection after observation: this is a real used ritual object, the worn look may appeal to Westerners because it has the feeling of being traditional.

Wooden masks:

- Pende Crest mask, accession # 1997.16
- Buffalo headcrest, accession # 1997.9
- Bwa owl plank mask, accession # 1997.4

2. Here are some of the aesthetic criteria among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria.  
(This exercise should speak to the issues of #2, above)

Is there an equivalent notion to these criteria in Western aesthetics? (Criteria by Thompson 1971: 374, 381)

- *Gigun*: relative straightness
- *Didogba*: good composition and symmetry
- *Ifarahon*: clarity of mass, parts clearly distinguished
- *Fifin*: clarity of line
- *Didon*: relative luminosity and delicacy
- Ephebism: depiction of figure in prime of life

3. Choose five objects in the Collection:

Divide students into groups and ask them to rank the objects, according to which is the best as "Art." Discuss (stress to students that there are no right answers).

Suggested objects:

- Leopard with prey, accession # 1997.24
- Kuba mug, accession # 1997.48
- Kuba pear-shaped iron blade, accession # 1997.52
- One of the four Senufo Kpelle masks, accession # 1997.19
- Standing attenuated figure, Dogon/Bamana style, accession # 1997.26

4. Choose several objects of the Davis Collection to display to students and ask them to play the role of museum director.

Read the following scenarii:

- You are the Director of an art museum and you want to use a piece from the Davis Collection that will highlight one of the museum's exhibitions. Which art object will you choose?
- You are the Curator of an Anthropology Department museum and look for a piece that would express culture and tradition in African art. Which object from the Davis Collection will you choose?

Suggestion: the class can be divided into two groups, each of them playing one of the roles. Compare the choices and the reasons why one object has been chosen over another.

The goals of these exercises reflect the general idea of this booklet:

- Realizing that art may be considered according to ethnocentric points of view
- Understanding how African art qualities relate (or not) to the Western Ideal
- Considering that aesthetic criteria are culturally defined
- Discovering that the idea of excellence can be cross-cultural

## Definitions of "Art" by Anthropologists and Art Historians

Artifacts - All objects that have been systematically altered by human manufacture or use. [Art]ifact.

### Definitions of "art" by anthropologists and art historians who have worked with non-Western arts.

1920s-

[Art is produced] when technical treatment reaches a certain standard of excellence and the process is controlled so that typical forms are produced. The judgement of perfection is aesthetic. (Franz Boas, cultural anthropologist)

1950s-

Art is the creative manipulation of elements of form toward the production of aesthetic objects. (Warren d'Azevedo, cultural anthropologist)

Art is any embellishment of ordinary living that is achieved with competence and has describable form. (Melville Herskovits, cultural anthropologist)

A work of art makes a selection of elements of experience, imagination, and emotion. It does so in such a way that its formal expressions and arrangements call up in us special kinds of reactions, evaluations based on feeling tones that we call aesthetic. When a work of art is judged aesthetically--and it can be judged from economic, political, or religious points of view--it is considered primarily in relation to its formal qualities: its arrangements of lines, mass, color, sound, rhythm. (Raymond Firth, British social anthropologist)

1970s-

Art is play with form, the purpose of which is to producing some aesthetically successful transformation-representation. (Alexander Alland, cultural anthropologist)

Every work of art is an autonomous sign composed of (1) an artifact functioning as a perceivable signifier; (2) an "aesthetic object" which is registered in the collective consciousness and which functions as "signification"; and (3) a relationship to a thing signified...of any given milieu. (Jan Mukarovsky, semiotician)

1980s-

...Things made and done by humans...that we consider to be art have most or all of the following properties: they convey culturally significant meaning; they are made within a style tradition that is characteristic of their provenience; they use a medium in such a way as to have a strong impact on the senses and feelings; and they are products of individuals who are recognized by their fellows for their exceptional skill. (Richard Anderson, art historian)

Art can be considered a part of technology. Technology is the system of tools and techniques by means of which people relate to their environment and secure their survival. Art can act as technology when it: (1) is a tool for interacting with other people or with environmental or universal forces; (2) is a communicative (persuasive, instructive) device; (3) is a tool for making the intangible concrete; (4) is a form of entertainment or recreation; and (5) performs other functions. (Arnold Rubin, art historian)

1990s-

Art is the process and products of human skill applied to any activity that meets standards of beauty in a particular society. (Serena Nanda, cultural anthropologist)

Art is human skill specifically applied toward drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, music, dance and perhaps a number of other activities. Both the skill and the results are called art. The purpose of art is to communicate ideas and emotions. (Paul Bohannan, cultural anthropologist)

Art is the creation of aesthetically powerful products through a sequence of problem-solving choices made by some person for some good reason. (J.J. Brody, art historian)

**"ART IS WHAT ANTHROPOLOGISTS CHOOSE TO CALL ART!"** (William Fagg, Africanist art historian)

Discuss these "open-textured" or "omnibus definitions" of art (a cluster of characteristics relating to "art") that serve as cross-cultural definitions: these definitions were devised by Roy Sieber (Africanist art historian) from conclusions of the scholars involved in the "Conference on the Traditional Artist in African Society" held at Lake



Tahoe, 1965 (the following concepts can be used to identify "art," but no one concept is indispensable).

1. Art is man-made.
2. Art exhibits skill.
3. Art exhibits order (pattern, design).
4. Art conveys meaning.
5. Art is the product of conscious intent.
6. Art conveys a sense of unity, wholeness.
7. Art provides an immediate response.
8. Art is affective (promotes an emotional response).

## Using the Davis Collection

- *Ibeji* figure, accession # 1997.29

### The *ibeji* figure

#### General description:

Yoruba male *ibeji*, Nigeria. Wood, blue pigments, camwood. 9 ¾". Facial details (large eyes, lashes defined). Coiffure: pointed and rubbed with indigo and bluing. Legs: short, defined feet, round platform. The body is rubbed with camwood.

Care of the object: the *ibeji* can be handled by students. Picture and slide are also available

#### Cultural context:

The *ibeji* is a twin figure. The Yoruba have a high rate of twin births. Twins are considered blessed children and owners of a special supernatural power. Unfortunately, there are also a lot of infant deaths. Therefore, when somebody loses a twin, a statue replaces the deceased. The *ibeji* symbolizes the link between the twins and is the container of the potentially dangerous spirit. Usually the mother or the surviving twin takes care of the *ibeji*. The *ibeji* is treated like a living person: it is fed, bathed, clothed and even taken on journeys (in the case of small figurines). The *ibeji* can be male or female.

#### Features of Yoruba aesthetics as illustrated by the *ibeji* in the Davis Collection:

1. The body is not realistic because the head is bigger than the rest. The **proportions** are typical for most African sculptures and for the Yoruba in particular: two-thirds torso and legs, one-third head.
2. The emphasis on the **head**, in sculpture, shows the importance of this part in the Yoruba aesthetic. The head is the most vital part of the body, for it is the site of the vital life forces and individual fate.
3. The forehead should be smooth, delicate and almost shiny. Usually, the wood is polished by the artist and, in the case of an *ibeji*, polished regularly with oils by the owner when the *ibeji* is bathed. The shiny forehead relates to the ideal of light and luminosity. **Didon or luminosity** is one of the principal ways to recognize a beautiful piece of art.

4. The figure does not represent a human realistically. A sculpture has to express the mid-point of abstraction and resemblance. The sculpture does not resemble a specific individual.
5. *Fifin*: clarity of line. Thompson talks about “visibility” as a criterion of beauty in sculpture.
6. Ephebism: the sculptures tend to represent persons in their adult youth, when their physicality is at its best.
7. Face and body have to express beauty and a dignified and impersonal calm. The semi-closed eyes show no specific expression or feeling. Neither does the mouth (the lips are pursed), for it is not considered aesthetic to smile or show the teeth. The mouth has to remain closed to show one is master of his feelings. The general posture is stiff: the hands are straight to the hips.
8. *Ewa* (“beauty”): the exterior appearance has to be perfect. It expresses the “intrinsic worth of things” (Lawal: 309).
9. *Gigun*: relative straightness shown in the posture, and in the arms and legs
10. *Didogba*: good composition and symmetry.
11. *Ifarahon*: clarity of mass, parts clearly distinguished. Form, line and the skill of the carver are used to explain the aesthetic qualities of an object.

Suggested exercise in illustration:

Ask students to describe the *ibeji*:

- List on the blackboard the characteristics or key words used by the students
- Have them describe a Western style statue (picture provided)
- How are they the same or different?
- Have them use the characteristics of the Yoruba aesthetics: how do these characteristics apply to the *ibeji*?

## Connections to Other Topics

See **Topic Seven: Family and Kinship**, and **Topic Eight: Change Processes**, for other contexts in which the *ibeji* figure can be used.

## Additional Documentation

**Film:** *Behind the Mask* (on Dogon masks: the making of an aesthetic and spiritual event).

**Slides:** these two slides show the same object (a pair of Bambara *Tyi Wara* headcrests) in two different contexts:

- \* Bambara, *Tyi Wara* headcrests (*African Arts* 9: 1) shown in a museum context.
- \* Bambara, *Tyi Wara* headcrests (*African Arts* 1970: 9) used in a ritual.

## Supplementary Readings

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## Topic Two: The Mask and the Masquerade

### **Major Focus: Western and African Meanings and Functions of the Mask**

Western Concept of the Mask

African Concept of the Mask

Function and Meaning

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

The Social, Religious and Political Role of the Mask and its Context

### **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

### **Using the Davis Collection**

Butterfly Mask

Pair of *Tyi Wara* Headcrests

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion**

### **Connections to Other Topics**

### **Additional Documentation**

### **Supplementary Readings**

### **Bibliography**

### **Major Focus: Western and African Meanings and Functions of the Mask**

#### Mask:

Comes from the early Latin *masca*, which meant both “witch” and “mask”; something that conceals, hides (one’s personality, for example).

#### Masquerade:

The Western use of masks took place first in a theater context. Today the Western concept implies largely the idea of entertainment, where most of the participants are disguised. The term “masquerade” used in an African sense includes the idea of performance, the use of rituals, trance, music, invocations, etc. The masquerade takes place in ceremonies or festivals.

## Western Concept of the Mask

It is important to compare both Western and African cultural approaches to the mask and the masquerade, because this topic shows not only numerous similarities but also major differences in the use of these devices.

The Western tradition of the mask goes back to Graeco-Roman **Antiquity**. In secular dress, the mask was meant **to make people laugh, frighten them or inspire awe**. They were used by performers **in theaters** and showed the emotions of the character in the play, as with the traditional grimacing masks from Greek plays: the shape of the large mouth could express either terror, sadness (if going down) or joy (if going up). The masks could also indicate **the apparition or intervention of a divinity** (each divinity had symbolized characteristics). Both masks were used on a stage, with defined rules and in a **context of entertainment**.

**Throughout the world**, religious or pagan celebrations used the mask (and the costume coming with it) **to express symbols of supernatural forces**. In some places, masks were worn to celebrate different seasons (equinoxes) or the works associated with them (calendric rituals). In the east of France, for example, people burn a masked and costumed human-size puppet at the summer equinox to celebrate good harvesting.

In the **European Middle Ages**, *carnaval* was the period right before the Christian Lent. People were allowed to become "jokers," fools, dress and act like women (for men) or express their political - and even religious- opinions in public, because they were protected by the mask.

In many contexts, masks were **used for "rites of reversal"**: normal relationships of gender, power, or religion were reversed. This behavior implies the idea of the **concealing and revealing** powers of the mask and the costume.

The Church (which also represented political power) allowed this once a year. *Carnaval* was therefore **the expression of political and social control**. By allowing behavior otherwise severely repressed, the power in place gave the people a sort of "security valve," in a very unstable time in history.

The *Fasnacht* (carnival) of Basel, Switzerland still fosters this type of event: different "*corporations*" (association of people who share the same profession) go through the city in costumes and insult the audience or make fun of political leaders.

**Today**, masks and costumes have not disappeared in Western countries. But they may have **lost their original** function.

Masks may have become more a part of folklore or just a way to have fun. There are still *carnivals* in central Europe, in the United States (in Louisiana) or in Brazil (for example), but they are created - and perceived - as shows more than attempts to exercise specific ritual functions. Halloween can be a good example of loss of function and meaning. In Celtic times, it was meant to release the fears of the winter through the wearing of intriguing masks, which provoked fear and suggested a relation with death and haunting spirits. Today, it has lost his meaning and function and has become a very commercial event.

### **African Concept of the Mask**

**In Western tradition**, a mask is characterized by the fact that it is **worn on one's face**. Usually the mask covers and hides the face, and one is not supposed to know who is behind it.

The African sense of a mask follows the same idea of the mask hiding the identity of the wearer: it **conceals**. However, African use **involves a total ensemble**, combining the mask, the dress and the person who **uses them in a performance**. There are other significative variations between African and Western functions.

#### To conceal and reveal

These are **dual possibilities** in which the performer gains prestige through his skill in combining **performance** (aesthetic statement) and the **supernatural aspect of the masked figure**. The process is dual as well because while concealing, the mask also reveals. While concealing the real character of the wearer, it reveals the character of the spirit or ancestor implied by the use of a specific mask and context.

#### Changing one's identity

The masked performer in the African context becomes **another entity**. The mask and the costume associated with different types of masks **reflect symbolically the identity and presence of an ancestor or a spirit** - good or evil, protective or dangerous. Everybody sharing the same culture recognizes who is meant to be represented by a specific mask. However, nobody will mention the real human identity of the performer. This situation allows the performer to act in ways that



would make the community uncomfortable usually, but becomes acceptable during the masquerade.

### The Wearer of the Mask

Masks can represent male or female entities. Women, however, while allowed to participate in ritual events involving masks, are not allowed to participate as performers wearing masks. In many cases, this is tied to the idea of male “ownership” of supernatural power. This may also be explained by the fact that the performer is capable of **acting outrageously and extremely**, even though the audience accepts and acknowledges that the performer is portraying otherworldly characters.

The fact that somebody wears the mask and takes the identity of supernatural entities can sometimes be potentially dangerous, for both the wearer and/or the audience. The wearer must perform protective rituals, trances or invocations.

### General description of African masks:

1. They are usually carved from wood
2. They can be made of metal, cloth or woven, vegetable fiber
3. They can depict humans, animals, spirits
4. They may come in one or several pieces
5. They may be ornate to improve their power or be very stylized
6. The ornaments can be sculptures, fibers, beads, pigments
7. Raffia can be woven into both face mask and dress (in Zaire, for example)
8. The whole costume may be made of cloth (among the Yoruba for example)

### There are numerous ways to wear a mask:

1. On the face, held by strings or attached on cloth. See the Davis Collection to illustrate these types of masks.
2. Resting on the shoulder or held in front of the face with the hand. The masks can be heavy.

3. On the top of the head, as a headcrest with harnesses (among the Bambara people, for example). See the Davis Collection to illustrate this type of mask.
4. Attached around the head with a net-like cloth that ensures its stability, in case of voluminous and tall masks (among the Bwa people, for example). See the Davis Collection to illustrate this type.
5. Held or manipulated with wooden sticks, to make it dance or to move some parts (among the Ibo people, for example)
6. Attached to a big cloth that covers the entire body (among the Baule people, for example)
7. It can be painted on the face
8. It can be carried in the hand
9. It can be suspended from the belt

### The Idea of Entertainment

Some performances are meant to **amuse** the audience, as it has become the case in Western tradition. The difference in African masking lies in the **classification of masks**, between spirit masking (sacred) and comical human masks (animal masks can be used in this category too).

Very often, the comical can also be linked to the spiritual: an ancestor can satirize the living, for example. The behavior is cross-cultural: satire is an intrinsic component of European masquerades as well. Another form of comical effect in African masquerades is found in some masks that feature Western characteristics, like white faces, for example. These masks definitely provoke laughter.

### Slide to illustrate a comical Western satire:

\* Masqueraders playing the role of a white couple, dressed and acting in comical ways.

### Several factors determine the **comic or satirical effect** of a masquerade:

1. The audience, just by looking at a mask, knows if the mask is intended to be horrifying or comical.
2. The audience can see the uncovered feet or hands of the performer: the **identity** of the performer is **not concealed**. Moreover, masks themselves

can be comic because some of their features reveal the face of the performer (when the audience can see the eyes of the performer through large eye holes in the mask, for example)

3. The **performer's gestures** tell the audience if the situation is comic (by dressing up like a woman or acting in a servile manner, for example).
4. The performer suddenly taking off his mask may be perceived as a **comic gesture**. In this case, nobody in the audience will acknowledge any change in his identity if he continues to personify (perform) the character symbolized by the mask (Harding 1996: 65).

## Function and Meaning

### The Context

It is important to see the mask in its **specific context**. In the Western sense, every individual can wear a mask and the mask is used **to amuse both** wearer **and audience** (who may also be masked).

### In Africa, the mask has a **specific function and meaning**:

1. The mask is the **container for the spirits**. The ancestors or forest spirits won't be able to enter the world of the living without the masquerader. They will communicate with humans through the mask.
2. It is associated with a **ceremony or a ritual**
3. It is **performed by a specialist** who knows how to manipulate and activate the powers of the mask. In almost every culture, only men can perform the mask when it has to be used in rituals.
4. The performance gives a **personality** (good or bad) to the mask and erases the wearer's identity.
5. The mask is **considered alive** (inhabited by a specific spirit). It has the power to affect the living.
6. The mask gains meaning when there is an **audience** to witness the process.

7. The mask appears in a specific repertoire: music, songs, gestures and dances are important components of masquerades. The mask becomes "multimedia" (N. Wolff).
8. In some cases, the mask **can change functions through time**. It does not represent the same idea, for the spirit speaking through the mask may not always be the same.

## **Suggested Lecture Points**

### **The Social, Religious and Political Role of the Mask and its Context**

#### The mask and its spiritual content:

Role: Most of the masks and their dresses are **associated with spiritual activities** (ceremonies, rituals). Its role is to create a **material link between the visible and the invisible**. The mask touches the notion of **embodiment**. The mask seems to be better suited to represent and embody an ancestor or another spirit than statues (Hackett 1996: 49).

The concept of embodiment expresses the importance of the role of human **agency and practice** that construct social forms as well as cultural forms. African art stresses more the power implied in some objects than the actual object itself. The meaning is more important (Arnoldi 1996: 2). Therefore, an object can take an active behavioral role in a community. The object brings people together around common goals (Arnoldi 1996: 11).

#### The costume:

Dress stresses one's **status in a secular context**, but dress in masquerades is intended to enhance the fact that the wearer becomes a spiritual entity. A "costume" is not intended to be worn in everyday life but for special occasions. **The costume transforms the wearer** into something he or she cannot be in everyday life - man into woman, mortal into god, man into animal, etc. (Perani & Smith 1998: 10). Therefore, the costume is not only an aesthetic statement, it represents also a complex ensemble of **visual and symbolic references**, recognizable by the audience.

The masquerade includes other objects as well:

- These objects are manipulated by the performer (fans or rattles, for example) and are considered power objects, too. They help to **define the gender or the personality** of the spirit and its specific powers.
- **Costumes** used in most of the performances cover the body, so one cannot recognize the performer under the costume.
- Many people, like woodcarvers and tailors (along with leatherworkers and weavers) may be involved in the making of a costume for a masquerade.
- A masquerade involves rituals to give power to the mask. Other rituals are performed to protect the wearer and/or the audience.
- A masquerade represents the involvement of the **whole community**; everybody participates in the process, from musicians, dancers or performers to the audience members.

The example of the *Egungun* festival:

The festival takes place among the **Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria**. The members of a men's secret society organize this masquerade. *Egungun* masqueraders appear in an annual festival that takes place **to honor the ancestors**.

*Egungun* performances can also be done at a person's funeral, because this specific masquerade is tied to rituals that **celebrate life cycles and death**. The performer is masked and dances at the funeral, where he becomes possessed by the spirit of the deceased, who becomes an ancestor.

This role of the mask is linked to spirituality but also to community life. In a way, it helps the mourners and the family to accept the death. In the meantime, it marks the transition to a new status, for the deceased relative officially becomes an ancestral spirit that will be revered.

At the same time, *Egungun* masks and costumes can make **an aesthetic statement**. For example, **the *Egungun erin*** (one type of costume with very rich textiles and ornaments) expresses the **prestige of the owner** through the quality of the entire dress while serving a spiritual function (Wolff 1981: 69).

(See the slides on this particular festival in "Additional Documentation.")

### The mask and its role in the community:

Very often masquerade performances mark the role of the mask in the community. Through dance, song and theatrics, the masquerader **stresses what has gone wrong**, or what has to be corrected in the community and for individuals.

1. The songs are often considered humorous. They make the people **laugh about serious problems**, in order to resolve them.
2. **The mask may denounce** individuals who are greedy or act improperly in the community.
3. The performances may sometimes satirize behaviors speaking about **maintaining** the traditional gender roles.
4. **The behavior of the performer often reverses what is normal**. It is a way to criticize what goes wrong in the community and thus helps to find a solution to the problems.

By ridiculing individuals or speaking out loud about the problems, the performance **stresses and strengthens normal behavior and cohesion in the community**. This situation touches the heart of the rites of reversal that are intended to increase the community's welfare.

### The mask and its link to politics and social order:

In a formal leadership pattern, masks can either **support the power structure or challenge it**. Masks have the power to express ideas that cannot be expressed in the everyday life. They can as well question and criticize power or social problems.

1. The mask allows men to behave in a stylized and ritualized manner, at the **opposite of their everyday expected behavior**.
2. Some masks are allowed to **criticize** the power and make fun of leaders, without being punished. The power of the mask provokes a behavior otherwise censured and considered improper in front of leaders.
3. By doing so, the leader has the opportunity to hear his people. The mask becomes the **speaker of the community**, saying thing that could not be evoked otherwise.
4. Some masks appear to show the power of a leader (small masks suspended from the belt) or masqueraders who dance to honor the leader in public events.

Some masks are sometimes used in **competition for leadership**. The *gon* mask, among the Bakwele of Congo, for example represents a ferocious animal (stylized gorilla) and the performers carry out stylized fights to determine who has the power of leadership. This is another example of the way leaders deal with the violence that could emerge from real confrontations (Siroto 1972: 66).

## **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

- Compare Western classical masks and African ones (see the pictures that follow):

Suggested elements of discussion:

\* Greek masks (in *Rome Antique*, L. Franchi dell'Orto, 1982: 53): the mask on the left expresses astonishment, fear or awe, according to the context of the play. The mask on the right characterizes all the pleasures of luxurious life. The codes and symbols expressed by the masks are known by the audience.

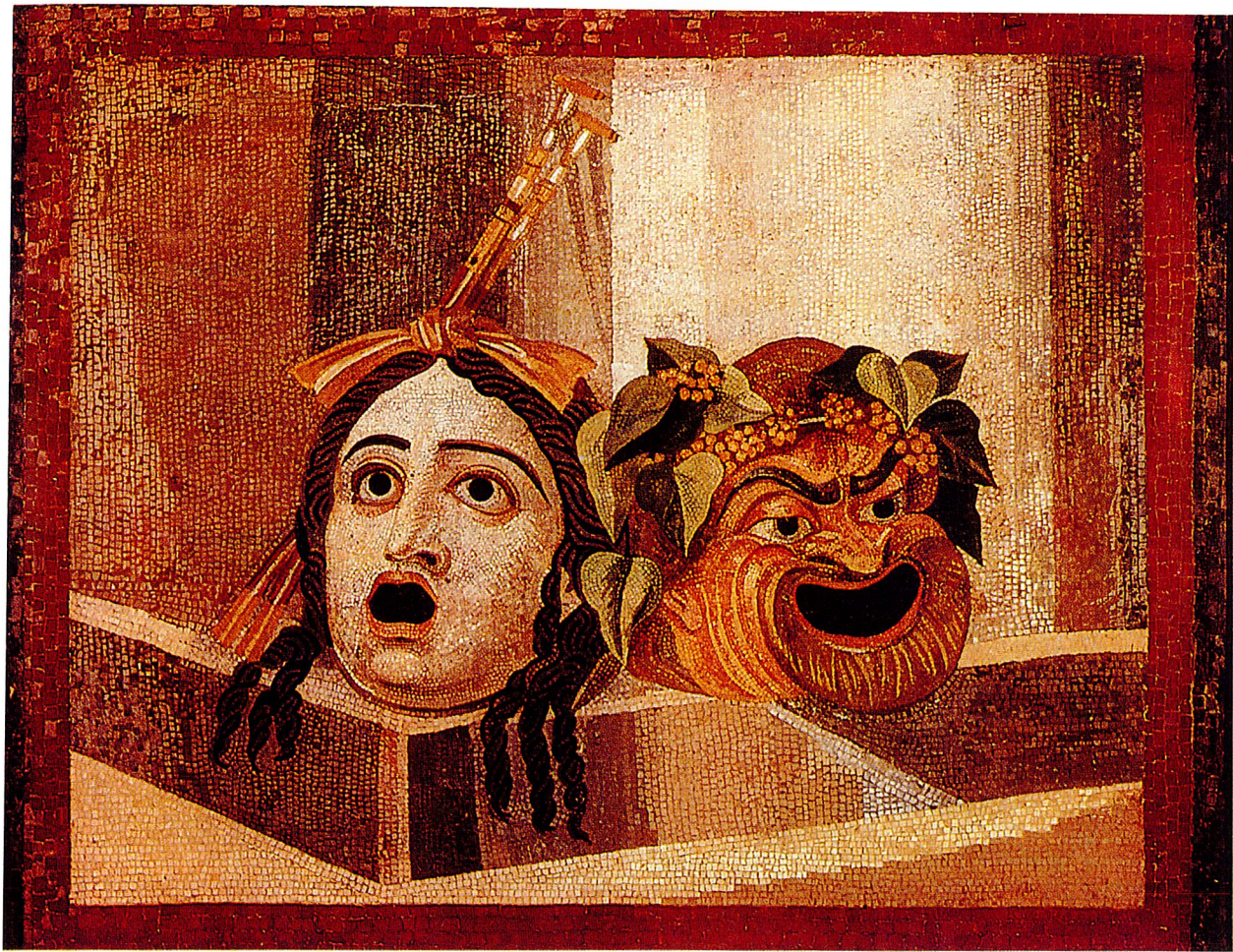
\* Mask worn by the Ibibio people of South-West Nigeria (Leuzinger 1960: 142). Wood, hinged jaw, worn by the Ekpo secret society. The mask inspires awe: the mouth is open not in a smile, but to display aggressiveness (the teeth are showing). The mask is worn to exorcise demons at the yam harvest, and to ensure order.

- Compare the function and meaning of carnival in Brazil (and/or Halloween in the U.S.) with the *Egungun* Festival (see additional readings on this subject). Observe the masks, the costumes, the "rituals," etc.

## **Using the Davis Collection**

- Butterfly style mask, accession # 1997.1
- Pair of *Tyi Wara* headcrests, accession # 1997.17









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## **Butterfly mask**

Bwa, Voltaic. Wood, red, white and black pigments. Horizontal, 11 x 74".

Care of the object: due to severe deterioration, this object cannot be handled by the students, but a picture is available.

### Description:

This is a horizontal plank mask. The horizontal panel suggests a butterfly. The front shows well-balanced diamond and circular geometric shapes. A checkerboard pattern is engraved in a series of frames or panels. Perpendicular black, white and red lines separate them. The butterfly has a carved mouth (a hole so the wearer can see). The horizontal superstructure is decorated on the top by seven added sculpted birds. They seem to sit on the edge of the mask. The back of the mask is painted in the same colors, but the pattern represents triangles grouped in several small frames.

### Use:

This plank mask is worn horizontally on the face. There is a socket for the face on the back of the mask. There are holes for the straps on either sides of the face, from forehead to chin. It is used during spring celebrations and at the beginning of the farming season. The time period corresponds to the arrival of swarms of butterflies, which signal the return of spring. The small birds added to the structure also mark the return of spring. They symbolize protective spirits. The patterns and colors represent symbolically the Bwa's representation of the universe: night and day, good and evil, life and death, etc. Black and white are geometrically balanced, the patterns are symmetrical. Everything in the design of this mask symbolizes the necessity of balance in both living and non-living worlds.

### Slide in illustration of the butterfly mask:

\* Butterfly horizontal mask in action. Bobo, Upper Volta (Huet 1978: pl. 162).

### **Pair of Tyi Wara (Chiwara) headcrests:**

Mali. Wood, basketry caps, cord. Basketry height: 4". Male: 39 ½"; female: 33"; offspring: 22". Made by a skilled carver. Collected ca. 1965.

Care of the object: students can handle them. Picture available.

### Description:

The base of the headgear is a round basket, with raffia borders. There are two superstructures in the shapes of a male and female antelopes attached to the basket bases. The mask is worn on top of the head, with cloth to conceal the face and the body of the performer. There are no signs of holes for strings in the baskets; not clear if these particular pieces were danced ritually.

### - Animal figures:

They come in pairs: a male and a female oryx antelope carrying a calf on its back. The adults are represented in similar ways. The male is easily recognizable by its sexual attributes (genitals clearly defined). All three have stylized scarifications and elegant horns (four for the adults, three for the calf). The artist plays with symmetry, vertical and horizontal lines, negative and positive space.

### Use:

This is a dance crest worn by the Bamana (or Bambara) *Tyi Wara* men's association in Mali. The association teaches the skills of good farmers. The headdress is called "*Tyi Wara*," which means "farming wild animal," but also names the whole masquerade. The mask comes from mythology. *Tyi Wara* is a supernatural entity, half-animal, half-human, in the shape of an antelope. He taught the Bamana how to farm the land. The mask is worn in dances: men dance, women sing and young farmers hoe the ground around the dancers. The dancers imitate the antelope and are covered from head to toe with *da* grass or raffia fibers. Dancers carry two canes of *sunsun* wood representing the legs of the antelope; these canes are also symbolic of the original tools of *Tyi Wara*.

### The symbolism of the male/female antelope pairs:

1. They symbolize the essential union between men and women to produce new generations

2. They symbolize the union between sun and earth to produce crops
3. The ears of the male figure represent the ears of the men who listen to the songs of the women
4. Both male and female figures must be used in the rituals, but are both worn by men only

The image of the male is influential:

1. Its horns symbolize the growth of grain
2. Its penis symbolizes the planting of seeds
3. The zigzag pattern represented on its back symbolizes the path of the sun

The image of the female is important as well: she symbolizes fertility, not only for the fields but also for the women of the community.

### **Connections to Other Topics**

- See **Topic Three: The Arts of Religion and Rituals**, for the use of art as spiritual mediator.
- See **Topic Five: Textiles and Clothing**, for the use of cloth as aesthetic statement (since some masks are worn on dresses and some masqueraders can be clothed completely with textiles).
- See **Topic Six: Gender Issues**, for a link with rituals and festivals in associations and initiations.

### **Additional Documentation**

Slides:

\* Yoruba, Gelede masquerade

This masquerade intends to celebrate the high status, power and privileges acquired by postmenopausal women who are considered as potential witches. Through its rituals, the *Gelede* association tries to counter the potential negative power of these women. The top of the mask (the face) has to be visually pleasing to be effective (aesthetic statement). The mask is designed to entertain and pacify evil witches.

\* Yoruba *Gelede* masquerader in action. Dahomey (former name of Benin). The masquerader shows female attributes.

(These two slides may serve as visual support for **Topic Six: Gender Issues**, when speaking about women and associations)

\* Mask on stilts representing *Ayoko*. Yoruba, Benin (Huet 1978: pl. 85).

\* Masquerader disguised as a woman giving her breast to a baby. Yoruba, Benin (Huet 1978: pl. 86).

\* Vertical masks. Dogon, Mali (Huet 1978: pl. 117).

\* Group of masqueraders arriving for the annual purification rites, Bobo, Upper Volta. (Huet 1978: pl. 162).

Slides concerning the *Egungun* festival:

\* Yoruba *Egungun erin* masquerade (N. Wolff).

\* Yoruba *Egungun* masquerade. The masquerader wears red cloths and uses a fly whisk.

\* Yoruba *Egungun* masquerade. The body is covered with cloth and a plank across the shoulders gives the figure a voluminous aspect.

**Video:** *Behind the Mask* (on Dogon making and dancing of masks).

## Supplementary Readings

*African Arts*, special issue on the arts of *Egungun*, vol. XV, 1981-1982.

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Roy C., *Art and Life in Africa*, University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1985. (General study of African material culture)

## Topic Three: The Arts of Religion and Rituals

### **Major Focus: Art and Spiritual Life**

African Cosmology

Spirits and Mediator

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

The Arts of Divination and Healing

### **Suggested Discussion**

### **Using the Davis Collection**

Yaka "Mr. One Leg" Charm

Lele Friction Oracle

### **Suggested Discussions**

### **Additional Documentation**

### **Supplementary Readings**

### **Bibliography**

## **Major Focus: Art and Spiritual Life**

### **African Cosmology**

Arts in Africa cannot be separated from the **supernatural**. Anderson (1989: 45) states that art, religion and even magic share a common denominator: all three recognize antithetical aspects within their representation. Art separates the beautiful from the unappealing; religion makes a distinction between sacred and profane; magic opposes what humans can control and what other forces control. In Africa, all three domains are interconnected and are related to the **cultural representation of the universe through the arts**.

In African cosmology, there is a clear **separation between two types of worlds**:

1. **The human world:** the human sphere includes the village and the people, but also larger concepts such as domesticity, order (security, laws), and other aspects of culture. This first sphere **involves humans** and reflects the **cultural realm**.

2. **The wild:** wilderness expresses the contrary: it connotes danger, instability and mysterious powers. It is the world of the **spirits**. It reflects the **realm of nature**.

A **cosmology** explains one culture's **structure of the universe** (incorporating space, time, etc.) and its origin. It deals with philosophy and mythology. The world or universe is viewed as a continuous cyclic movement, for **everything** (both animate and inanimate) can **express power and energy**.

The African pantheon is usually constituted by:

1. **A supreme being:** The creator deity is **not worshipped** or represented directly, in the Western tradition, and it is somewhat indifferent.
2. **Diverse spirits:** The numerous spirits **are celebrated and commemorated through rituals**. They can be spirits found in nature, invented spirits, cultural heroes and ancestral figures. Natural and invented spirits are more feared than others because of their power, which comes from the supreme being.

Spirits share some characteristics:

- They are anthropomorphized: people envision them as having human physical characteristics. Spirits share as well psychological characteristics: they are believed to behave like humans.
- Ancestral spirits have less power. They represent deceased members of the community. Ancestral spirits can intervene between the living and the diverse other types of spirits.
- All spirits receive offerings and sacrifices and can be the focus of rituals.

## **Spirits and Mediators**

In a community, certain people are thought to have power and energy given by the spirits (natural or ancestral).



### They are able to control the supernatural power:

1. They are usually people whose **position is recognized**, like leaders, cult priests and diviners
2. For some, **prestige comes from their special skills**, as with hunters, blacksmiths, sorcerers, masqueraders; men dressed as spirits and ancestors can also mediate spiritual forces.
3. All these people are able to **communicate with the spirits and manipulate them**. They can give direction to the ancestral spirits in order to help the community maintain its social order.

### The spirits represented in art

#### Ancestral spirits:

They represent deceased persons. They can also represent the **generalized spirit of family ancestors**. They are represented by male or female human figures. They provide powerful **links to the supernatural world**. Used in rituals, they can communicate with the living. In many cases, people address the ancestors to ask for fertility, safety, success, etc. Ancestral figures and masks are kept at home in shrines in the family compound.

Usually, an ancestor is considered a deceased person. But he becomes very “alive” and present, when addressed through an art object that has been sacralized (through accumulation etc.). The object becomes the spirit of the ancestor, and is even given the same name. The powers are in the natural materials applied to rituals.

#### Representations of deities:

In some cultures, figures are carved to represent the **pantheon of gods** or their worshippers (for example: Eshu, among the Yoruba). The pantheon groups all the divinities in a ranked hierarchy contributing to the mythology of a given culture and considered as a whole. It may also represent heroes (founders of dynasties, for example). The deities can be represented by male or female figures.

#### “Fetishes”:

“Fetish” is a Western term, and is considered negative by today’s anthropologists. It was used to refer to charms and power objects.

Power objects are used to direct supernatural forces, to help in case of illness or misfortune, to ensure success in hunting expeditions or in childbirth. They can be the equivalent of good luck charms but can be used to destroy another's luck. They may be portable or located in shrines. If they are not efficient, they are thrown away or destroyed.

#### Animal sculptures:

Animals represent wilderness, and **symbolize powers of nature**. The Lele friction oracle (accession # 1997.32) of the Collection represents one use of animal representation.

#### Masks:

The mask is a very powerful object: it is the mediator between the living and the spirits. See also **Topic Two: The Mask and the Masquerade**, for more explanations on the topic.

Examples of masks in the Davis Collection that combine the animal representation: the Bwa buffalo helmet mask, (accession # 1997.9) or the Western Sudan bovine mask, (accession # 1997.10).

#### Ritual implements:

They are the **visible part of shamanistic activities**. The ritual specialist may possess rattles, drums and bells, as well as fans, vessels (used in sacrifices or libations) and other divination materials. In many societies, the specialist is the only one who can use these devices (and knows how to use them).

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

#### **The Arts of Divination and Healing**

In order to perform and ritualize religion, people produce specific art forms, used in the African context to invoke the power of the spirits on the behalf of the culture.

The arts are therefore expressed in

1. Rituals
2. Dances
3. Masquerades
4. Specific objects: charms, oracles or divination devices.

Art becomes the indispensable medium between the two fundamental poles of African cosmology (nature versus culture). In everyday life, art embodies the power to heal, do divination and ensure protection.

The concept of “**activation**”:

Unlike Western religious art, African religious paraphernalia contains supernatural and **spiritual powers**, which have to be activated to be efficient.

Activation of powers can be realized through:

1. **Incantations, rituals or sacrifices**
2. Addition of **symbolic accessories** such as fly whisks, small masks attached to the belt, small bags containing herbal preparations, etc.
3. **Containment**: the source of power can be represented on a sculpture by a swelling of the stomach or a cavity in the torso in which the priest hides special preparations (herbal preparations usually). The Davis Collection has a Sherbro soapstone figure (accession # 1997. 33) with these characteristics.
4. **Accumulation** (another form of containment): new objects are continually assembled and attached to the original one (nails, cloth, animal skin, shells or sacrificial residues, for example) which give the object additional powers.

The ritual specialist:

- Rituals are normally **performed by specialists** (priests, shamans, diviners) because dealing with the spiritual world can be dangerous.

- The specialists perform rituals **to establish a connection between the visible and the invisible** (unlike in the Western Christian religion, the communication works in both ways). Art becomes the “visible expression of the invisible and transcendental” (Leuzinger 1960: 24). Performances, in the case of festivals, masquerades or rites of passage, are also a way to give meaning to an object.
- The ritual performed on an art object erases some of the distance between the living and the spirits.
- Rituals may be performed only one time or repeated several times.

Art becomes religious through its **meaning** and its **power** to communicate with the spirits. The aesthetic experience, in the context of religious belief, is related to the expression of the encounter with supernatural forces. Both experiences express the same feelings: awe, fear, veneration, mystification (Hackett 1996: 47). The Yoruba, for example, speak about *ase* (**power**) to express the affective reaction to an aesthetic statement, as well as the supernatural agency that produces ritual results.

#### Shrines:

Shrines do not house the supreme being, as in the Western tradition. Neither do they always house spirits. They are believed to be “earthly recreations of divine kingdoms” (Hackett 1996: 146).

#### The shrines are material objects that serve as focuses for rituals:

1. One can pour libations on them
2. Sacrifices can be performed on them
3. They can be activated with chants or invocations

#### Shrines can take different forms:

1. Pots or plates
2. A simple wood stick in the ground, with a fork to hold the sacrifices
3. Drums
4. Chief's stools

5. Anthropomorphic figures (example: the Mami Wata figures among the Yoruba in Nigeria)
6. Some shrines are temporary in nature (for example palm leaves placed to mark a sacred spot).
7. Domestic shrines: in the house; the corner of a room with a statue surrounded by offerings; particular spots on a wall with sacrificial residues, etc.
8. Mural decorations (in South Africa, for example)
9. Personal altars: marked by an object, like the *ikenga* carving (among the Igbo, in the Lower Niger region) or a loom (for the Tukolor in Senegal)

### **Suggested Discussion**

Consider how art is differently represented in the religious belief of Western (and/or other cultures) and African cultures.

#### Suggested areas of reflection:

- Cathedral vs. nature
- The Orthodox icon vs. no representation of the supreme divinity
- Christian rituals vs. African ones
- What objects symbolize spiritual powers in both cultures? Are they used in the same way?
- How do African people, as opposed to Western people, communicate with spirits and divinities?

### **Using the Davis Collection**

- Yaka "Mr. One Leg" charm, accession # 1997.26

- **Lele friction oracle as elephant, accession # 1997.27**

These two objects come from the Zaire River Basin region. The area develops a strong association between art and some essential functions in the life of communities, such as rituals for religious purposes. Art has several functions, for it covers more than one use (from healing to circumcision ceremonies, for example).

By tradition, the Zaire River Basin has linked leadership with patronage of art, since being a leader was considered as a symbol of divine power. The art produced in these conditions has therefore a strong link with prestige and, of course, with the power in relation with supernatural forces (see also Topic Four, Power, Prestige, Politics).

Figurative sculpture is the main device used for divination and healing. A divination specialist is the mediator between humans and the celestial realm. His knowledge comes from learning from masters during specific initiations. But healers become specialists only when they are told so in a dream or after an illness. They exercise their power in the ritual use of objects.

### **Yaka "Mr. One Leg" charm**

#### General description:

Democratic Republic of Congo, Yaka people. Material: wood, cloth and unidentified elements, bundled. Size: 7 ¼". The figure represents a man, with a missing leg. He is covered with a piece of animal skin.

#### Use:

This is a power figure, used as a charm or as medicinal device. This type of power object may vary in form from naturalistic to geometric.

A figure like this is used in the region for healing and protecting the people from malady or to distress an enemy. It serves also when taking an oath.

The indigenous medical practitioner owns the power object. The medicinal matter is kept under a wrap. The nature of the power object defines the power of the

specialist when he uses the figure in rituals that involve esoteric and medical activities.

The power and function of the sculpture is defined by the nature of the client's request. This function can be either positive (healing, for example) or negative (afflicting an antagonist, for example).

Among the Yaka, each specific function is expressed by a specific type of figure and follows a specific ritual. Aesthetics, meaning and function are typically interactive.

This particular healing charm shows evident use. The usual medicinal and sacrificial accretions seem to be kept in place under an animal skin. Some figures, however, may be painted or polished, according to the type of handling.

Being a healer among the Yaka is prestigious: the specialist owns the objects that represent spiritual power (figures or masks) and he knows how to activate them. The figure in the Collection is depicted wearing a prestige headgear or coiffure worn by leaders.

Care of the object: available in photo and slide, but should not be handled by students.

### **Lele friction oracle**

#### General description:

Democratic Republic of Congo, Lele people. Material: wood, fiber. Size: 10".

The carved figure shows a stylized and elongated elephant: the head is pointed, the trunk is small. The back is flat and very worn, due to evident use in divination acts. The animal is slightly swollen mid-way. It shows detailed designs: some are on the flanks, and the mid-body is incised crosshatching, a motif common in prestige woodcarving of the area. The tail is thin and extended, ending in a flat diamond shape. The knob-like rubbing device is tied with a cord attached to the neck.

#### Use:

Friction oracles possess special powers associated with the different quadrupedal animals they usually depict (dog, crocodile, bush pig, warthogs and lizards). All the animals come from the forest wilderness, and play the role of intermediary between humans and nature spirits. It is very important to be in contact with the nature

spirits, for they control fertility, prosperity and healing. The diviners choose to represent animals because animals are familiar with the wild areas where the spirits live, therefore they are designated mediators.

Occasionally, some friction oracles with four legs may have human heads that face upward to symbolize the link between humans and spirits. Essentially, the friction oracle embodies the spirit animal. During the process of divination, humans cannot be harmed by the spirits.

The divination process consists of rubbing the small wetted knob of wood over the animal's back as ritual verses are recited. When the knob hesitates or sticks, an answer - associated with the verse - is received.

The ritual can be carried out for several reasons:

1. To detect witches, responsible for death and illness
2. To detect adulterers
3. To find who is responsible for a crime. The specialist recites several names of potential guilty people during the ritual. When the rubbing device finally sticks to the back of the animal, one can identify who is the responsible party (one's name pronounced at this very moment).

Care of the object: available in slide and as an object to be handled by students.

## **Suggested Discussions**

Using the slides:

- Compare the two masks and say which one seems the most aesthetically pleasing to you and why.

\* Anthropomorphic mask with a lot of added material.

\* Anthropomorphic mask with simple lines and no particular expression



Suggested element of discussion: the one, which is the most ornate (has symbolic colors, or shows accumulation) represents a greater aesthetic value in Africa because it is considered to be charged with **power**.

(Additional question: what adds prestige or power to a religious object in a Western culture?)

Discussion topics:

- How do the people of the Zaire River Basin control the medical issues (health, fertility) compared to the practice in modern Western medicine? What is the advantage of divination in the practice of medicine? How do African people deal with social problems?

Suggested element of response: African spirituality vs. Western science; the role of development of indigenous knowledge concurrently to modern Western medicine; the masquerade as “security valve” for social dysfunction, etc.

- Do you think modernization (according to the Western model) will alter some aspects of the African social and cultural organization?

Suggested element of response: human power of action and decision vs. control by supernatural forces; the role of traditional medicine compared to a Western approach, etc.

## **Connections to Other Topics**

See **Topic Three: The Mask and the Masquerade**, for a link with rituals and the dichotomy between nature and culture.

See **Topic Eight: Family and Kinship**, for the role of spirits and ancestral figures, and **Topic Five: Power, Prestige, Politics**, for religious power representation.

- In connection with anthropology in general: use the paradigms addressed in the fields of symbolic and psychological anthropology.

## Additional Documentation

### Use Additional Slides:

#### 1. To illustrate the concept of shrine:

\* Eshu shrine, Yoruba. *Eshu is in the shrine of the Elemoso (African Arts V.IX # 1).* Eshu is a trickster god. It is one of the few gods represented in art. Eshu is associated with chance and uncertainty, disorder and changes in the universe. He is the mediator between spirits and the living. He is generous to the people who worship him. He can give a lot of children and favor commercial transactions (he is often present in market places).

\* Eshu figure held by a high priestess (*African Arts, V. IX # 4*). Eshu wears a hat, a bead necklace and a small bag. Usually, Eshu is shown with a knife or a knife blade coiffure. Weapons and excess of hair symbolize his energy and sexuality.

\* Eshu shrine, Yoruba. The shrine is a calabash with signs of libations and offerings.

#### 2. To illustrate the concept of divination and healing:

\* Power object (nkisi), songye, Zaire. Wood, copper tacks and twisted rings (Stanley Collection).

\* Female magical figure, Luluwa, Zaire. Wood (Stanley Collection).

\* Nail power figure, Kongo, Congo. Height: 24 7/8" (Cornet 1971: Ill. 10).

\* Power figure with opening in the stomach, Kongo, Congo. Wood.

**Film:** *Behind the Mask*

## Supplementary Readings

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Hackett, Rosalind, I.J., *Art and Religion in Africa*, Cassell, New York, N. Y., 1996, chap. 2 and 6.

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## Topic Four: Power, Prestige, Politics

### **Major Focus: Art as a Symbol of Power**

Religious and Political Power

The Patron and the Artist

### **Using the Davis Collection**

Prestige Robe from Liberia

Shoowa/Kuba Raffia Cloth

Kuba Iron Blade

### **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

### **Supplementary Readings**

### **Bibliography**

### **Major Focus: Art as a Symbol of Power**

In this section the Suggested Lecture Points and the Major Focus have been combined in order to avoid redundant information.

### **Religious and Political Power**

#### Religious Power

Religious power is expressed through rituals, masquerades, healing, and divination and through the ceremonies associated with secret societies. Often specialists can implement the rituals suited for each particular event.

#### The specialist can be:

- a diviner
- a healer
- a sorcerer
- a priest

- a masquerader
- a leader

Specialists determine how the ceremonies will be held and are active actors in the process. They have the power to activate power objects (masks, specific figures, and shrines) and to interpret the language of ancestors or other spirits, for they have the power to communicate with these entities (through dreams or trances, for example).

Religious persons (they can be male or female) are respected and have a high status, because of their power to mediate between humans and spirits and because of their influence on social and political control.

They may wear insignia of their power, expressed through art objects such as:

- whisks
- amulets
- staffs
- masks (in masquerades or small ones attached to the belt)
- animal skins, etc.

It is common for kings to be viewed as sacred figures. Therefore, they are seen as exercising both political and priestly roles.

Some rulers have to be addressed indirectly, by covering one's mouth (as in the case in some Cameroon Grassfields kingdoms) or through "translators" recognizable by their specific staffs of office.

### Political Power

Leadership structure is elaborate and is usually expressed through two concepts:

1. Centralized societies under the ruling of a single powerful leader with a hierarchical bureaucracy (example: the Asante kingdom of Ghana)
2. Decentralized societies where authority is shared by more than one leader (example: the village-based societies in Sierra Leone or the Igbo in Nigeria)

In kingdoms, the political authority evolves around the court.

But some other political functions are carried out by institutions:

- Spiritual power of secret societies
- Corporate associations such as age grades
- Extended families and kinship groups such as lineages and clans

How to express the power:

Leadership power can be expressed through various aspects of material culture or regalia:

- Dress
- Cloth (strip cloth, raffia, etc.)
- Prestigious animal skin (leopard)
- Specific colors
- Specific coiffures
- Vessels (cups, boxes)
- Headdresses (crowns, hats, etc.)
- Artifacts of ivory
- Artifacts of bronze
- Artifacts of gold
- Specific beads (coral, for example)
- Jewelry (pendants, necklaces, rings, armlets, bracelets)
- Fly whisks and staffs
- Palace architecture (veranda pillars, painted murals, size of the rooms, sculpted doors, etc)
- Royal shrines and commemorative heads (in Benin, for example)
- Masks (for example, among the Eastern Pende people) and masquerade performances
- Statues: royal portraits (among the Kuba, for example)
- Thrones and stools
- Elaborately carved headrests (among the Luba, for example)

Some of the regalia can be very heavy to wear.

Dress is the most important leadership regalia in Africa. Leaders may sometimes have a monopoly on certain kinds of regalia or valued materials.

Male leadership is sometimes expressed by fly whisks. The material used for the handle as well as the type of animal hair determines the importance of the ruler.

Examples of high prestige carried through the material of the whisk:

- Elephant tail hair: associated with kings and chiefs for the Asante of Ghana.
- Horse hair: associated with the highest prestige for the Frafra of Ghana or the Yoruba of Nigeria.

### **The Patron and the Artist**

Leadership art:

Political power is the foundation for artistic creation.

1. Kings or Chiefs commission art works and thus express their power and show their prestige.
2. Leaders can as well decide how to use the art.
3. The patron stimulates art production and motivates the economy.
4. The patron thus has an influence on the stylistic continuity within a tradition.
5. The patron can encourage an individual artist's creativity.
6. The artist gains prestige through the patronage of leaders.

The leader has a monopoly over particular art forms, motifs or even artists themselves. However, other patrons can order specific art forms: religious practitioners or masquerade associations often commission art (masks, sculptures for shrines, objects to control and honor supernatural forces)

Commoners form the lesser part of the patronage process, commissioning utilitarian objects (vessels, clothing, for example).

The market agent or trader may be considered a type of art patron too, if the art is traded regularly and of economic significance.

**The patrons' private ownership of art forms** is different from "ownership" in the Western view.

Ownership of art serves as a political act:

1. It dictates a social behavior for the whole community.
2. It shows their prestige to the outsiders.
3. It also constitutes power just because the patron can afford to buy art.

The symbols related to some figures - king figures, for example - mark status and authority. For example the Chokwe figures, both male and female, represent lineage and leadership and add to the prestige of the owners - chiefs and notables - because they are associated with prominent ancestors.

The artist creates the artwork, but the patron introduces the work in a social context. Therefore, the object will be recognized as art and will take on function and meaning.

The status of the artist

Art is the marker of social identity: a specific style expresses one's social and cultural identity. It indicates wealth, social status, leadership role, gender, etc. The individual can define and position himself or herself inside the community through art.

But art stresses as well the idea of legitimate authority and social structure necessary to everyone. Thanks to art, the individual can understand the vital opposition between civilization and the wild. This notion is fundamental to African societies: the bush (wild) exists in opposition to the culture (civilization). The mediator between the two is the art object.

The first person to interact with art is, of course, the artist. To consider the role of art, we have to be aware of its authenticity. The artist is recognized in his or her indigenous group and becomes even more famous through patrons from within the culture.

In the case of ritual production, both the artist and art have **power**:

1. The power is supernatural, for most of the carvers draw upon spiritual powers and the carving is made according to a **ritual process**.
2. The use of most of the figures is in itself a manifestation of supernatural



power (in the case of privately owned figures, we can identify fertility, divination or initiation figures).

3. It is the calling of the spirits through the carving that makes it an agent of supernatural power.
4. The complex symbolism often represented on the figures -and the symbolism implied by the figure itself- also represent power.
5. The artist can have personal power because of his secret knowledge of carving (an obvious link with prestige).
6. The carver often performs a specific ritual before releasing the work to the patron.

The artist's works are recognized by a **specific style**. There is a sense of **prestige** associated with the creative process, even if the artist does not sign the work. The sculptures are culturally validated and used for a **specific function**. They are easily recognized by anyone of the same cultural group.

Artists do not sign works either, since they are recognized by their **skills** and the style, which represents their ethnic group. The artist is one individual, who owns the skills to create art, so from one perspective, he or she is the real owner of it. The African artist is usually recognized as a professional, expressing the skills in a specific medium (wood, ceramics, textiles, leather, mud architecture, wall painting).

The **role of the artist** is not only to please patrons or to express the prestige of a whole group; it also shows everybody what beauty is, according to pre-established codes and symbols. The artist translates his or her own creativity into a general aesthetic statement.

The Dogon artists from the Southern Cliffs area of Mali, for example, transpose the sharp lines of the cliffs to the lines of their statues. One individual aesthetic statement becomes the artistic trademark of the group.

Many artists work part-time as farmers. In some kingdoms, the artist is a professional working for the court. The traditional, pre-colonial gender differentiation within artistic media is less of a factor anymore in some arts, although sculpture is still almost completely male dominated.

#### Sources of inspiration for the artist:

- The patron (if the artist works on commission)

- The dreams: these are divine commissions. This testifies to the important association between artists and spiritual beings. The artist thus materializes the ideas received in dream by his or her spiritual benefactor. The devotion between artist and spirit distinguishes the artist from sorcerers or diviners, but contributes to the status of artist.

## Using the Davis Collection

- Prestige Robe from Liberia, accession # 1997.44
- Shoowa/Kuba Raffia Cloth, accession # 1997.47
- Kuba Iron Blade, accession # 1997.52

### Prestige Robe from Liberia

#### Description:

Man's prestige robe. Liberia. Guinea Coast art area. 55 w. x 42" l. Cotton, rayon.

It is made of dark blue indigo-dyed and white striped **strip cloth**.

Seventeen narrow strips of cotton warp-faced cloth are vertically seamed, selvage to selvage, using a straight machine stitch of white thread to form a length of cloth, which is folded in half horizontally, to form a tunic. There are no side seams: the arm openings are open. The bottom edge is unhemmed and left to fray. This may be due to the fact that the robe was never used. The tailor left it so each individual buyer might size the robe to his body proportions.

The pattern of each strip consists of a wide black band adjacent to alternating thin white and black stripes. The long, narrow neck opening is rectangular and lined with **tie-dye** cotton cloth. The cotton is turned under and stitched down, inside the garment.

There is a side-opening pocket on the front of the robe, lined with cotton and attached to the robe by two rows of stitching. One strip of cloth is used to face the opening of the pocket.

The pocket is decorated with **embroidered motifs** (cluster of three large spirals of gold rayon thread, joined by two parallel lines with a zigzag running between the two). There is another embroidered motif in the back of the neck (a crescent shape filled with four tiers of zigzags).

The style:

The robe reflects the Muslim style, which diffused from North Africa. The pocket can hold the Koran (the Muslim holy book), although the buyer of such a robe is not necessarily Muslim.

The function:

This is a garment for a minor chief; it is a **prestige item**. The robe is loose, allowing air to circulate, yet protects the person from direct sun. By folding the cloth up onto the shoulders, one can uncover the arms.

Care of the object: the robe can be handled by the students.

## **Shoowa/Kuba Raffia Cloth**

Description:

Kuba, Zaire, Southern Savanna art area. Raffia, cut-pile-embroidered cloth, also called "kasai velvet." This cloth consists of two panels sewn together, to form a 44" length x 14 to 15" width.

The geometric and complex patterns are distinctive of the Kuba. The raffia is dyed in ochre, brown and black. Some raffia fibers are used in their natural color. To soften the palm fibers, the woven panel is dampened in water, then kneaded or beaten to make it supple.

The loom:

- The southern Zaire looms are unusually set in an oblique position.
- The mechanism is very simple: a heddle and two horizontal bars. The warp strands are stretched between these two bars. The upper bar is suspended from a crossbeam and two poles.

- The weaver sits under the 45-degree angle warp.

#### Gender issues:

- The mat is woven by men.
- Women add the freehand embroidery.

#### The embroidery involves two types of stitches:

- Stem-stitching: a continuous thread forms thin lines.
- Cut-pile (or plush) technique: raffia is threaded through a needle and is sewn so as to be "sandwiched" between the overlapping warp and weft threads. It is then cut very close to the mat, to make a very short pile. The technique produces a rug-like aspect.

#### Use:

Until the late nineteenth century, raffia mats were important trade items and the principal monetary unit. They were shipped to other African countries. This type of mat became a prestige item for Kuba kings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is worn for special ceremonies, like weddings or burials. It is regarded as a valuable gift for chiefs and other people of high status.

The pieces are hemmed on all four sides. The mat consists in several panels sewn together, to form a larger cloth, which can be used for various purposes.

#### Where and when is the cloth used?

1. The cloth is worn for official occasions and formal ceremonies.
2. In African material culture, this type of cloth corresponds to the necessary regalia of wealthy people (especially in the kings' regalia). They will show the status and the power of one family. In the case of the king, it expresses his spiritual superiority as well. The king wears an elaborate dress ensemble of raffia cloth. Women of the royal entourage wear skirts in the same fabric.
3. This item is also an art form. It expresses one community's artistic prestige and aesthetic values. Therefore, the kings play the important role of patrons. They do commission these cloths and show them to everybody during ceremonies. By doing so, they reinforce their own prestige but also

express the refinement of the culture in which they live.

4. The way the cloth is wrapped around the body and the play in the pattern effect is meant to provoke a visual effect: an aesthetic statement.
5. Both men and women wear raffia cloth on ritual occasions.
6. The cloth can as well be exhibited on stools during prestige ceremonies.
7. The quantity and quality of the cloth shows the high status, the prestige, the influence and the wealth of the owner.
8. During funerals the cloth is displayed and then wrapped around the corpse before the burial.
9. At funerals, women dressed in these skirts dance and the visual impact is even greater.

#### Producing and wearing Kasai velvet becomes a three level statement:

1. An aesthetic statement: artistic creation
2. A religious statement: the king who wears the cloth is from divine lineage and shows his power through beautiful textiles
3. A political statement: the leader shows his power and personal wealth. He shows as well the wealth of the whole kingdom.

#### The role of the artist:

The raffia cloth reflects the Kuba's aesthetics.

The artist varies the techniques, the colors, the thickness, the width, length and thickness of the lines, the degree of angle in the shape/color relationship, etc.

The basic rules are to respect the similarity of line, form and structure.

His/her skills are valued and respected among the community.

#### The geometric patterns:

1. The geometric and complex patterns are distinctive of the Kuba. The forms use straight lines, assembled in geometric shapes in order to produce a contrast between light color (ochre) and the darker ones (black and brown).
2. They are the same as the ones found on the Kuba woodcarvings. These

patterns can also be found in scarifications or on copper knife handles.

3. The designs are not necessarily repetitive in a same mat: various types of designs are juxtaposed.

#### Symbolic of the designs:

The traditional designs represent indirectly the three stages of the Kuba mythology: cosmogony, institution of the kingship and matrilineal descent.

As in all Africa, the Kuba culture demonstrates the dichotomy between the wilderness and the village: nature versus culture.

The founding myths are represented in the women scarifications. The patterns of the scarifications are then represented as well in the designs of the raffia mats.

The designs integrate stylized evocations of the elements of the mythology (water, rhythm of night and day, opposition between nature and culture and between spirits and humans).

From the late fifteenth to the seventeenth century, the designs were developed in an Afro-European syncretic fashion. The scarifications and woodcarvings have preserved this influence.

#### The patterns have specific names and represent important animals, people or events:

- Back of Lizard.
- The Feathers of Baba.
- The Eagle's breast.

#### Innovations in design are valued, and the aesthetic statement is expressed through details:

- Color shift.
- Thickness of line.
- Irregularities.

The basic rules are to respect the similarity of line, form and structure.

This type of cloth is also found in the kings' regalia. The king wears an elaborate

dress ensemble of raffia cloth. The cloth can as well be exhibited on stools during prestige ceremonies. The quantity and quality of the cloth shows the high status, the prestige, the influence and the wealth of the owner.

However, both men and women wear raffia cloth on ritual occasions, especially in the case of funerals. Men and women of high rank dress elegantly with raffia cloth. During the funeral raffia cloth is also used as prestige display and then wrapped around the corpse before the burial.

Care of the object: due to severe damage, the mat should not be handled by students. Picture available.

Other items with similar designs in the Davis Collection:

- Mug, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo. Accession #1997.48
- Mortar, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo. Accession #1997.49
- Box as skeumorph of basket, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo. Accession #1997.50
- See also the Kuba iron blade described below.

## **Kuba Iron Blade**

Description:

Kuba, Zaire, Southern Savanna art area.

Use:

The knife is a prestige item for Kuba kings. It is either held by a cloth wrapped around the waist or hung beside the royal chamber.

The knife's design invokes the spirits. It shows as well the high status of the wearer.

Care of the object: the knife can be handled by students.

## Suggested Questions and Exercises

### Discussions:

1. Start reflection on the expression of power and prestige expressed through clothing:

- Does this concept exist in Western societies?
- How do Westerners express status and power?
- What clothing has prestige within our own social or cultural group? How is it obtained?

(It may be interesting to involve international students in the discussion)

The discussion may open to the use of material culture in Western societies, compared to this concept in African societies.

2. Use the example of the Kuba knife (a symbol of power):

Compare this concept to the Western ownership of weapons in terms of meaning and function.

3. Consider the status of artist in Western societies, in comparison to their status in many African societies.

## Supplementary Readings

Adams, Monni, "Kuba Embroidered Cloth," in *Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas*, Berlo J. C., Wilson Lee Ann, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1993, chap. 9.

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## Topic Five: Textiles and Clothing

### **Major Focus: The Social and Spiritual Functions of Fabric**

The Marketplace

Techniques

Gender Roles

Clothes as Display

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

### **Connections to Other Topics**

### **Using the Davis Collection**

Man's Robe

"Country Cloth"

Weaving Paraphernalia

### **Suggested Discussions**

### **Additional Documentation**

### **Supplementary Readings**

### **Bibliography**

### **Case Study**

### **Major Focus: Social and Spiritual Functions of Fabric**

**Dress:** Dress is a complex concept. It expresses not only **covering the body** (with textiles, for example) but also all the other elements that are involved in the **process of adorning and beautifying the body**. This includes "cosmetics, scars, coiffures, apparel, jewelry, and accessories held by or for a person" (Smith & Perani 1998: 10).

African textiles are very important items used in many forms, from secular dress to ritual cloth or costume.

## The Marketplace

### Cloth as commodity:

Cloth is an important part of the marketplace and plays an **essential role in economy**, for it is one of the most common and affordable art forms in Africa. Marketplace **vendors often give the cloths** poetic names (after proverbs or the motifs on the fabric).

Examples of names of modern Ghanaian machine printed wax prints (Littrell 1985: 171):

- "*The Falling Tree*": illustrates the proverb that "a tree cannot stand alone."
- "*Death Staircase*": illustrates the subject matter of death and mourning.
- "*Nkrumah*": named for the first President of Ghana.

To purchase a cloth, several aspects are considered:

### The economic:

Traditional cloth, hand-woven cloth, latest fashion cloth or prestige cloth are very expensive.

### The materialistic:

Westernized dresses or clothes that can be worn to work are preferred in modern everyday life. Clothing becomes an important component of the **household budget** (Liedholm 1981: 72).

The **prices** are determined by the fact that one has to buy clothes from a "reputable" tailor who handcrafts his product (Smith 1981: 39).

The demand for textiles is **seasonal**: the dry season corresponds to the period of festivals, so then production is at its peak.

### The symbolic:

Parallel to the names of some fabrics, which indicate when and how to wear them, the buyer has to consider how he or she will look in some clothes, what other people will understand about him or her in looking at the outfit. Once again, specific

textiles are associated with specific status, gender, etc. The buyer can express a message through his or her clothes.

## Techniques

### Weaving:

In West Africa, one type of handmade cloth is woven on small narrow-strip looms, to form **strips** that will be sewn together in bigger shapes to become clothing. (For specifics about this technique, read the case study on *Aso-Oke: Yoruba Strip Cloth*, after this section).

### The yarn:

Yarn **handspun locally** is used in **traditional cloth**. But today, the thread is usually **imported** and varies from cotton to synthetic to Lurex (shiny thread), according to the moment's trends.

The **economic factor** plays an important role. The market determines the **price of the raw materials** and therefore the price of the cloth. The textiles themselves are often cheaper when imported (see Topic Eight: Change processes, for a link with the potential change from traditional cloth to westernized cloth).

### The dyes:

Indigenous natural pigments as well as imported chemical dyes are used. In the past, the most common color in African textiles was indigo, a rich and deep blue, obtained from indigo leaves. Today, a large choice of pre-dyed yarns and dyes is available. The choice of colors is determined by religious, symbolic or traditional criteria (as seen in Topic One: Aesthetics) as well as contemporary fashion.

### Using slides in illustration of the techniques:

- \* Senufo woman spinning thread (Gardi 1969: 184).
- \* Indigo dyeing in a small village in northern Dahomey (Gardi 1969: 204).
- \* Weavers in a Senufo village (Gardi 1969: 203).

## Gender Roles

### Gender roles in the weaving process:

Traditionally, the sub-Saharan African people **differentiate types of weaving** according to genders:

- **Horizontal** strip weaving is reserved **for men**, and is surrounded by **taboos** that prevent women from learning the process.
- **Broadcloth** weaving on a vertical loom is a **female** activity.

In many areas of Africa, **women also sell textiles** in the marketplaces. Women have become very important traders in textile and **organize the whole market**, from retail business shops, to market places and funding for newcomers in the profession.

### Gender roles in the aesthetic statement:

Textiles play the role of a **visual signifier**. In clothing, textiles basically signal the gender of the person by displaying gender-specific forms, colors or motifs. Each situation implies a specific type of clothing, where an individual can show good taste and wealth. The situation identifies the cloth and the cloth identifies the situation. Both express an aesthetic statement.

Two examples of cloth that identifies gender or situation: in some associations, women dress in the same fabric, in order to signify their belonging to a specific group (for other information on this subject, see Topic Six: Gender Issues). In the case of the Yoruba *aso-oke* cloth, a group of women can order the same outfit too (for other information on this subject, see the booklet to the showcase on *Aso-Oke: Yoruba Strip Cloth*, after this section).

The type of dress not only **identifies the gender** but also the **marital status** of a woman or a **specific period in her life cycle**, as it is the case for members of associations at puberty, for example (see Topic Six: Gender Issues).

### Ownership of cloth:

Some women in Africa own **family cloth** passed on from mother to daughter and carefully stored in **cloth boxes**. The textiles are often old and traditional and therefore very valuable. The number of textiles in the box, as well as the idea of

maintaining the tradition, **shows one woman's wealth**, and therefore the wealth of the whole family or clan. The cloths are worn on specific occasions, such as funerals.

## **Cloth as Display**

### Funerals:

Funerals - like childbirth and childnaming, initiation, wedding and birthdays - are among the life cycle-related ceremonies.

The display of textiles during mourning, wake and funeral serves **several purposes**:

1. **An aesthetic statement:**

The colors of the cloths, their elaborate display and the use of traditional textiles show intent to please the eye and sustain the aesthetic values of one culture.

2. **A social statement:**

The quality, beauty and well-displayed cloth reflect the wealth of the family of the deceased. The textiles honor the owners.

3. **A symbolic statement:**

In the case of Kalabari funerals (in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria), the display is organized in several rooms, on the funerary bed, and in the different dresses worn through the funerals by the mourners (women and men). The colors, the arranged shapes in which the textiles are displayed and the location of the display are meant to **express the "good life"** the deceased has lived (Eicher & Erekosima 1987).

The cloth display is meant to **honor the tradition** and the ancestors, through traditional textiles. It is also the place and time where the community decides if the deceased will be accepted among the ancestors to revere, **according to the impression given**.

### Prestige Cloth

The **sociopolitical role** of one person can often be easily recognized in his or her dress. Prestige is expressed through a specific type of cloth and sometimes by a

whole set of regalia. These material expressions of prestige are the most important **representations of leadership** in Africa.

Each type of status (from king to warrior or diviner) requires specific regalia. “Noble” materials are used for the accessories: bead, gold, ivory, bronze regalia and expensive traditional cloth are among the preferred ones. The leaders wear them in public appearances and on formal occasions. The materials themselves express the prestige.

Moreover, the viewer recognizes the status of one person by the way the person dresses. **Prestige and aesthetic statement are very close.** The textiles, especially, are subject to this consideration. The person who wears a traditional cloth (or a prestige cloth) has to behave in a way that fits the quality and beauty of the cloth.

**The wearer honors** his community, ancestors or subjects by wearing prestigious items of clothing and by behaving in the appropriate way while wearing them; but he **is honored** as well because **he wears the symbols of power** (leadership, prestige of one’s social status) and follows the tradition of its culture (it is a way to honor the ancestors).

Cultural occasions (like chieftaincy installations or house-opening ceremonies) enable both leader and other people to wear specific dresses, in order to make an aesthetic statement and situate the role of each participant inside the community.

The Liberian chief’s robe, in the Davis Collection, is an example of prestige cloth. It will be discussed further below.

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

Dress follows a **system of symbols**, common to one culture and defined and understood by this given culture.

Dress is the **vehicle for two kinds of messages**:

1. The first message is transmitted in the first look at a person’s clothing: it generally defines gender, age group, status (political or social), ethnic group, and other **basic information** for cultural insiders.
2. But beneath these basic ideas, clothing also transmits **symbolic meaning**: it implies a connection between dress and function (express the prestige of the owner, or defining one person’s place in the community), specific events (secular ceremonies, rituals) or ethnic specificity.

**The way the dress is worn** is important as well; improper use may appear inappropriate, rude or even offending. In many cultures, improper dress (or public nakedness) is a sign of mental illness.

These kind of messages imply both **emic (insider) and etic (outsider) views** of clothing, because some variations in the dress or some symbols may not be recognized as such by an outsider or may make sense only for the insider.

### **Connections to Other Topics**

See **Topic Two: The Mask**, as well as **Topic Three: The Arts of Religion and Rituals**, for a link between costume and dress.

See **Topic four: Power, Prestige, Politics**, for a link with the chief's regalia.

See **Topic Eight: Change Processes**, for an example of less traditional fabric.

### **Using the Davis Collection**

- **Man's robe, accession # 1997.44**
- **"Country cloth," accession # 1997.43**

#### **Man's robe**

##### Description:

Prestige robe. Liberia. 55 w. x 42" l. Cotton, rayon.

Made of dark blue indigo-dyed and white-striped **strip cloth**.

Seventeen narrow strips of cotton warp-faced cloth are vertically seamed, selvage to selvage, using a straight machine stitch of white thread to form a length of cloth, which is folded in half horizontally, to form a tunic. There are no side seams: the



arm openings are open. The bottom edge is unhemmed and left to fray. This may be due to the fact that the robe was never used. The weaver left it to fray so each individual buyer can size the robe to his body proportions.

The pattern of each strip consists of a wide black band adjacent to alternating thin white and black stripes, oriented parallel to selvage. The long, narrow neck opening is rectangular and lined with modern **tie-dye** cotton. The cotton is turned under and stitched down, inside the garment.

There is a side-opening pocket on the front of the robe, lined with cotton and attached to the robe by two rows of stitching. One strip of cloth is used to face the opening of the pocket.

The pocket is also decorated with **embroidered motifs** (cluster of three large spirals of ochre rayon thread, joined by two parallel lines with a zigzag running between the two). There is another embroidered motif in the back of the neck (a crescent shape filled with four tiers of zigzags).

#### The style:

The robe reflects the Muslim style, which diffused from North Africa. The pocket can hold the Koran (the Muslim holy book), although the buyer of such a robe is not necessarily Muslim.

#### The function:

This is a garment for a minor chief; it is a **prestige item**. The robe is loose, allowing air to circulate, yet protecting the person from direct sun. By folding the cloth up onto the shoulders, one can uncover the arms.

Care of the object: the robe can be handled.

#### **“Country cloth”**

#### Description:

Wheel of Strip-woven cloth. Liberia. 3 1/2' w. x 12 1/2' ht (length not measured). Cotton.

A fine older example of **hand-loomed cotton strip cloth**, with the traditional blue and white stripe pattern.

Use: as currency or cut and edge-stitched to make clothing.

Care of the object: students should not handle the roll.

### **Weaving paraphernalia**

The Davis Collection includes two heddle pulleys representing stylized female figures.

**Heddle:** in a loom, one of the sets of vertical cords forming the principal part of a harness, through which the warp threads (yarns placed lengthwise), are drawn.

**Pulley:** wheel for supporting, guiding, or transmitting force to or from a moving thread.

About the pulleys:

Origin: Mali

Sizes: 8" and 6 ½".

Description:

The largest pulley comes with a narrow and elongated bobbin. The female figure of the pulley has large breasts and wears a Malinke coiffure. The smallest pulley stands with raised arms, the hands reaching to the head.

- The Department of Anthropology displays some textiles and objects relative to one specific textile tradition in Africa: the strip weaving in Nigeria, among the Yoruba. For more information on the showcase, see the additional resource booklet *Aso-Oke: Yoruba Strip Weaving*, following Topic Five.

## Suggested Discussions

- Cross-cultural reflection: consider what makes the difference between Western and African behavior concerning clothing.

Suggested elements of response:

- Western: fashion changes are rapid, “disposable” clothes, unisex clothing.
- African: traditional cloth, display of textiles, prestige associated with specific cloths, the dress defines one’s identity.

- Use the concept of the African “cloth box”:

What would you put in your cloth box at puberty? What is the meaning of the different cloths you chose?

Compare to the American “hope chest”: how are the purposes of African and American concepts related?

Suggested element of discussion: the American quilt as cloth that tells the story of a family and keeps memories alive.

- Many Africans see public nakedness as related to mental illness: is there anything similar in the Western aesthetic?

Suggested element of discussion: the latest fashion trends show more and more of the body; Western culture emphasizes the cult of the body; by contrast, public nakedness is embarrassing or shocking: why?

- The dress defines the wearer’s identity, gender or status:

Compare this notion to Western ways of clothing.

Suggested element of discussion:

Why do we dress? Are T-shirts with messages political, economic, or ideological statements? Observe the various dressing codes in America (cocktail dresses, casual, business, “gang colors,” etc.).

## Additional Documentation

- A showcase, situated in the third floor hall of the Department of Anthropology features textiles and other art objects from Liberia.

- Slides to illustrate different kinds of clothes and the link to prestige:

- \* Yoruba mother with twins, Lagos, Nigeria. Indigo cloth secular dress.
- \* Maasai Ritual expert (*Laibon*). In Beckwith and Saitoti, *Maasai*, 1980, p. 260.
- \* Kuba, Bushong. Official in formal dress, raffia skirt (*African Arts* 12: 32).
- \* Kuba, Bushong. Women from the royal family (*African Arts* 12: 32).
- \* Benin crown prince receiving homage (*African Arts* 17: cover).
- \* Yoruba headdress. Beads. The white color indicates luminosity; the birds symbolize the link with spirits (*African Arts* vol. III, p. 90).
- \* Ashanti chief dressed in *kente* cloth, accompanied by officials. *Kente* cloth is the traditional prestige cloth and is very expensive.

- Slides to illustrate different types of Yoruba clothes as described in the case study on Aso Oke: Yoruba Strip Cloth (see after the bibliography):

- \* Yoruba. Iseyin. Aso Oke storeroom. 1990.
- \* Yoruba. Iseyin. Lurex thread. 1990.
- \* Yoruba. Iseyin. Weavers. 1995.
- \* Yoruba. Man weaving a narrow strip.
- \* Yoruba. Textile stand at the market place. 1994. (Examples of shine-shine and indigo cloths.)
- \* Yoruba. Woman holding Eshu.
- \* Yoruba. Children at a birthday party. Ibadan. 1994.
- \* Yoruba. Men dressed in shine-shine.
- \* Yoruba. Mrs. Ige in shine-shine wrapper. 1990.

(All slides are from Dr. Wolff's private collection.)

## Supplementary Readings

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# **ASO OKE:**

## **YORUBA STRIP CLOTH**

### *Case Study*

Learning book for the showcase on the same topic

### Summary

#### **Introduction**

#### **Gender Issue: Men Strip Weaving**

#### **Technique**

The Loom

The Materials

#### **Designs and Styles**

#### **The Importance of Clothing: an Aesthetic Statement**

Dress Codes

Color Schemes

*Aso Oke* and Spirituality

Prestige Cloth and Leadership

#### **Taxonomy (author: Dr. N. Wolff)**

#### **Bibliography**

The Yoruba are the most important ethnic group of Nigeria. They are located in South-Western Nigeria. The display case features a map of Africa, Yorubaland enlarged. The display may change from time to time, but the subject is the same: the *Aso oke*, or narrow strip weaving of Yoruba men. The left side of the display case features traditional strip cloth. The right side shows contemporary cloth.

This small learning book explains the gender-related process of weaving in Yorubaland, as well as the technique, styles and designs of the woven cloth. It will eventually show the importance of clothing among the Yoruba. The taxonomy and copy of some textiles may be used as handout examples or as a basis for the study of the display case, for example.

### **Gender Issue: Men Strip Weaving**

Two different looms are used by the Yoruba: the vertical and the horizontal loom. The vertical loom is considered a household item and is used by women only. They lean it against the wall, and it is easily transportable to adapt to the household and childcare duties. The horizontal loom belongs especially to men.

The cloth woven by women has no prestige value: the fabric clothes the family. Women weave large strips. The cloth woven by full-time men weavers is a high prestige cloth, for men are considered specialists. They weave narrow strips called *Aso oke*. The cloth is usually four inches wide, and the strips are sewn together. The final cloth has the exact width and length needed for a garment. A cloth about five and one half inches wide is also woven; it is called "double wide." Men traditionally never weave on vertical looms: it brings bad luck. Weaving, for both men and women has mostly become an economic activity.

### **Technique**

#### **The Loom**

The narrow strip cloth is woven in a near horizontal to horizontal position. The weaver sits in front of the frame against the cloth beam. There are also the beater and the harnesses suspended from above (either from the frame or the rafters of a porch). The warps for the loom may be twenty-five yards or longer (depending on the type of garment the cloth will be used to make).

The weaver operates the loom with foot or toe peddles, attached to the bottom of each of the heddle harnesses. This operates the double-heddle shedding device. A

cord attached to the top of one of the heddle harnesses goes up and around a heddle pulley, than back down to the top of the other heddle harness. The heddles are made of string. Nowadays the Yoruba use a nylon string.

Note: the display case shows a spindle and warped heddles and beater, with warp hanging down. The Davis Collection has a *Wara Wara Limba* heddle harness that uses raffia fibers for the heddles.

## **The Materials**

They include silk, cotton (most common), rayon, and lurex (both imported). Cotton and silk are both indigenous and commercially spun. The cotton textiles shown in the display case are very fine commercial singles, with two strands worked as one in the warps. Many of the wefts in the collection use four strands worked together. The thicker the weft used, the more pronounced the ribbed effect would be on the cloth.

The strips woven with wild silk are made of hand spun fibers of the indigenous silk worm *genus anaphe*, the caterpillars of which breed in tamarind trees. The threads are used in their natural color.

Note: a cocoon is part of the display.

## **Designs and Styles**

Note: please note the taxonomy at the end of the guide.

*Aso oke* is divided into two types of cloth:

### 1. *Aso owu riran*:

- The oldest type, hand spun with hand spun thread. Cheaper mechanical spun imitations exist. There are three major types of *aso owu riran*: they are all traditional and very prestigious. The characteristics of this type of cloth are



determined by their color: brown (wild silk) for *aso sanyan*, red for *aso alari*, or indigo for *aso etu*.

- *Aso sanyan* can be woven plain or with stripes (*eleya* or *njawu*), with a matching dyed cotton weft thread. A cheaper version of *aso sanyan* is woven identically but with cotton.

- The red or purple color of the *aso alaari* comes from the first commercial dye brought from the English, alizarin (*alaari* may come from this name) and produced from madder. When over-dyed with indigo purple is obtained. It can be woven plain or striped.

- The indigo strip is called *aso etu* (*etu*, "senior *etu*," for the original one; *petuje* for the imitation).

## 2. *Aso owu eebo*:

- "Cloth of thread of Europeans," machine spun with commercial thread; they do not necessarily imitate old cloths.

- The most prominent type of fiber in the fabric determines the appellation of the cloth. The threads may be a matte finish cotton (for *olowu*), silk or rayon (for *siliki*, derivation of silk), or a shiny metallic lurex (for *shain-shain*, phonetic for "shine").

Shain-shain can be made in several types:

- Plain: the lurex has the dominant effect

- *Jakadi* (deformation of jacquard): small areas of lurex appear. If the area is big, it is *jakadi satin*. An all-lurex cloth is called "sandpaper," for obvious reasons.

## The Importance of clothing: an Aesthetic statement

### Dress Codes

The Yoruba have a concept of fashion. This notion seems to be more elaborated than the Western one. To dress beautifully reflects the inner beauty of individuals, but also shows the prestige of a group (family or community) and the talent of the weaver (if it is traditionally woven textile).

Yoruba are obsessed with displaying prestige cloth. They dress according to strict codes. Their idea of the perfect human being is a beautifully clothed body, for a person has to have both *iwa* and *ewa*, spiritual qualities of the ideal person and the beauty of physical existence. This is the ultimate aesthetic statement. These dresses are thick and heavy, which gives an even more dignified posture. In many cases nakedness signifies madness or infancy, it shows someone who is socially irresponsible. One has to show the superiority of the civilized versus the bush wild life.

The most prestigious (and expensive) cloth is the *Aso oke*. To wear these clothes is to show the importance of tradition. Yoruba wear them for social events (rites of passage, such as naming a baby, weddings, funerals, chieftaincy installation, etc.).

## Color Schemes

The basic color schemes are the colors of the threads, described above. To these colors the Yoruba add a language of colors, with symbolic meanings:

- funfun: white or lightness. It expresses the moral distinction of the wearer. Women with children or *ifa* priests (divination) wear it, for example. In the same sense, *shain-shain* is one of the most preferred prestige cloths. Because of its light reflective property, it relates to the idea of light, white, shiny, all qualities considered as very beautiful.
- dudu: black or darkness
- kpukpa: red (made from camwood). Represents the power of divinities and ancestors, and both beauty and danger.
- Purple is worn by people who worship the god of thunder
- Blue expresses the honor and dignity of high status.

Note: an indigo sample is displayed in the case.

## *Aso oke* and Spirituality

Prestige cloth is very expensive; it is commissioned by chiefs, wealthy people, priests, etc. It is worn as an honor and one can't act rudely in such a cloth. *Aso oke*

may also be used to cover a sick person. The cloth used in this case was previously used for the Egungun festival. This cloth has even more prestige and spiritual power.

The whole idea of spiritual well-being underlies the way Yoruba dress. The individual, in showing his beautiful image, not only expresses very good taste, he also expresses the physical and spiritual beauty of his family (for formal events, whole families are often dressed similar), his rank or his lineage (the *Aso oke* becomes the link with the ancestors). *Oso*, the personal adornment (it includes *Aso oke*, hairstyle, body decoration and jewelry) shows one's place in the society.

Given this, textile can be associated with socio-psychological well being. In a more practical use, it covers deformity and shows only beauty and prestige. The cloth is also used in dances. Once again, it is an aesthetic statement: the dancer rotates in a specific way, so that the robe puffs and seems alive.

### **Prestige Cloth and Leadership**

*Aso oke* is still the dress of choice for traditional leaders. The "patina" adds to its prestige and this can't be found in modern textiles. The "patina" implies a link with one's history and ancestors. "Patina" also refers to the fact that the real *Aso oke* become increasingly rare because of the difficulty to obtain the raw materials.

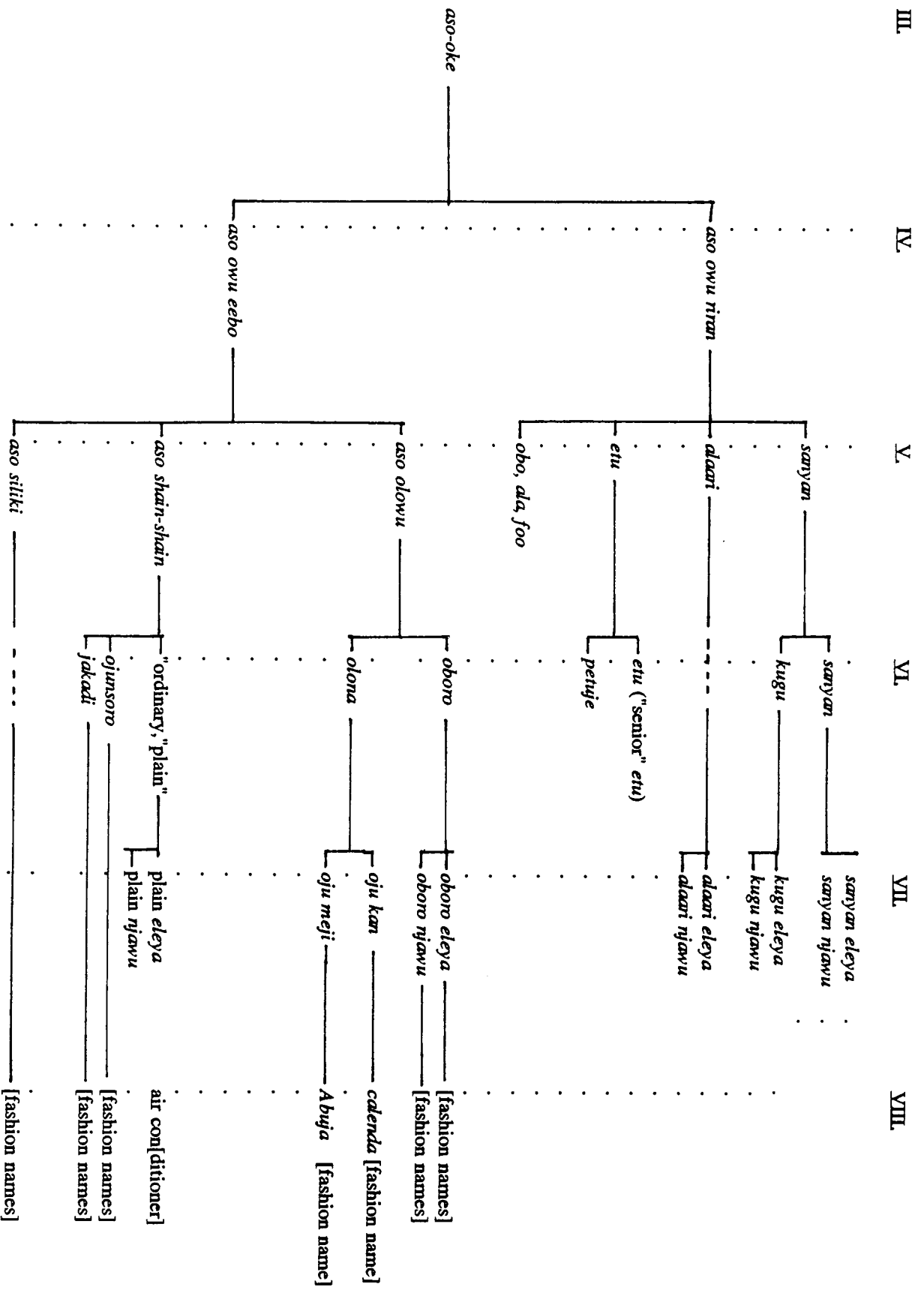
To add to the beauty, chiefs often wear embroidered gowns, including *Aso oke*, *jackadi* and lace (prestige cloths). But the very formal cloth still must be the *Aso oke*, worn when the leader presides over a ceremony (public or official). The adapted color will be red: *alaari* cloth shows the audience the authority and the relationship with divinities and the ancestors. In any case, the Yoruba think that they are beautifully dressed only if the cloth expresses both dignity (*iyi*) and distinction (*ola*).

Strip weaving in the Yoruba community is definitely an aesthetic statement. Everything in its elaboration answers to very defined criteria, associated with the ideal of beauty. The weaving, done by men only, requires a special loom and specific materials. Woven in small strips, it takes more time and artistic skill to make a whole garment. The *Aso oke* becomes an art object; it evokes prestige and makes the ultimate aesthetic statement.

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# ASO OKE TAXONOMY (narrow-strip weaving)



## Topic Six: Gender Issues

### **Major Focus: Aesthetics and Social Order**

The Representation of the Body

Gendered Art Expressions: Associations and Initiations

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

#### **Using the Davis Collection**

Two Mossi or Nuna Dolls

Female Akan Standing Figure

### **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

### **Additional Documentation**

### **Supplementary Readings**

### **Bibliography**

### **Major Focus: Aesthetics and Social Order**

#### **The Representation of the Body**

The sense of exterior beauty and its implied meaning is **strictly culturally defined** in Africa. In some societies as in the Western perception, a **specific vocabulary** has been developed in order to describe **aesthetics in art** and then applied to **the physical and mental aspects of human beings**.

General traits shared by both genders when it comes to the representation of people:

1. In art, the traditional form shows people without clothes: the body serves the purpose of being the concrete expression of a symbol or a spiritual entity.
2. Clothing is very important; it expresses wealth, status, gender and it works as an aesthetic statement.
3. Nakedness in public is usually considered a sign of mental illness.

### Inner beauty:

The idea of beauty, in general, does not necessarily apply to exterior aspects. African culture favors “**inner beauty**”: this is what a human being has to manifest.

In African art, there are no representations of the supreme being, for example. Even the divinities are seldom represented in figurative art. Therefore - and in contrast to the tradition in Western art (Greek sculpture, for example) - the African gods are not placed on a higher level of beauty. Like humans, these gods have to prove their “inner beauty.”

In African societies, the carved human figures are usually the **messengers of social control**. Their meaning is attached to **power** (supernatural and leadership power). Animality and humanity organize the universe. So each individual knows his or her place in the society.

### Representation of the couple: the Dogon's primordial couple:

This art form uses human figures to explain the universe.

### This figure is owned by the collectivity, but it serves individual purposes:

1. The carved couple represents the mythological couple, known as *Nommo*, opposite-sex twins who are said to have created the world.
2. They are the founders of the community, the ancestors.
3. They are a shrine (the figure hosts other gods).
4. The sculptor has recreated the perfect harmony of beauty: balance of positive and negative space, horizontal and vertical lines, importance of the numbers attributed to each gender, etc.
5. One important role of the couple is to tell the individuals who they are, how to understand the world and how they have to behave in it.
6. The idea of moral straightness may be represented by the straight posture of the couple. One has to be honest to come to personal achievement inside his community.
7. Art in the form of a human representation becomes the vector of social meaning and recognition.

### The male body:

The representation of the ideal male beauty should not have characteristics considered feminine (as described below for women). These characteristics include certain facial traits or types of clothes, for example.

Traditional male representations show men in their early adulthood: they are young, slim and their muscles are lean.

### The example of the personal shrine: the male figure of the *ikenga* among the Igbo:

1. The personal shrine expresses the idea of protection through a carved human figure.
2. The *ikenga* represents a human figure, seated or standing.
3. It is always a male: it serves as an icon of masculine power (the figure has ram's horns). The features on the figure allude to power (the tusk), high rank (*ichi* scarifications), authority (reference to animals), etc.
4. The Igbo emphasize individuality: the *ikenga* shows the man's achievement, his status and personal affluence.
5. The *ikenga* itself embodies the value of beauty and represents the artist's skills.
6. The link between the owner and its figure is strong: it brings luck.
7. *Ikengas* are commissioned by young men who seek success. They buy them when they establish a family. The figure represents a man's destiny, for it helps to achieve one's goals.
8. In order to make the figure potent, the object has to be consecrated, in presence of the owner's age grade. It involves the community.
9. From time to time, *ikengas* have to receive sacrifices.
10. Usually the figure is kept in the man's house. The relationship between the owner and the object is very close, for the *ikenga* is in relation with the owner's reincarnation. When the owner dies, it can be placed in the family's shrine or be destroyed.

In a larger sense, *ikengas* represent continuity in the relations between individual and society, and they are part of the process of becoming mature by defining one's identity and place.

In an everyday context, some men have more prestige, such as maskmakers, because



of their skill, which is recognized as exceptional but especially because of their relationship with the spirits.

#### Textiles:

Men as well as women tend to favor nice textiles and dress. The Yoruba, for example, praise extremely beautiful clothes. The clothes make an aesthetic statement and give beauty to their owner.

The cloth is generally woven by both men and women and uses basically the same color scheme and patterns. But the styles differ by gender and status (for example tunics or chief's robes).

Chiefs are recognizable through the beauty of their clothes. The image of the chief's power, status and wealth is expressed through the textiles (traditional cloth, expensive regalia) and the objects he uses. The portrait of a chief can also represent a man dressed in a prestigious wild animal skin.

#### The female body:

The traditional representation of the female body in art follows strict criteria:

The main application, when using the human figure as mediator, is in the sphere of the family or, at least, the personal concerns of fertility. The image of a woman and a child is common.

#### Maternity figures in Asante and other Akan groups:

1. These usually depict a woman sitting on a stool or standing and nursing a baby.
2. The woman has all the characteristics of beauty and of high rank (coiffure, scarifications, necklaces).
3. She is obviously linked to fertility.
4. But the statue is also another gender marker: it makes reference to the queen mother. Art becomes a spiritual medium (invocation of fertility) as well as a social and political medium. It actually depicts the important role of the queen mother's matrilineage. The statues are owned by the queen mother.
5. The figures have power, associated with the shrines of other gods.

The nursing mother figures show the natural power of women: they carry children by nature, but in doing this, they have the real social power. Some Senufo people use the same idea of commemorating and praising the courage and endurance of women: they have a figure called *tyekpa* (a mother nursing a baby). Senufo, like most African societies, have a lot of respect for elderly women, because even if the system is patrilineal in structure, it is matrilineal in character.

Traditional female representations show women in their early adulthood: they have large breasts as well as buttocks. These physical aspects express the role of women as wives and mothers. Protruding navels express the physical reality in African countries, but they also link the figure to maternity.

The water spirit of the Sande association:

This spirit is represented by black wood masks.

The masks represent the essence of feminine beauty:

1. Delicate facial features
2. Elaborate and elegant coiffures, ornate with fish, snakes or zigzag motifs (reference to the water spirit)
3. Shiny surface (a reference to the newly initiated oiled dark skin)
4. The neck with rings of fat symbolizes a beautiful well-fleshed woman of childbearing age.

The aesthetic qualities of a woman are not necessarily expressed in the exterior appearance. For the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria, for example, concepts of feminine beauty include:

1. The idea of “good”: the beauty of a woman is expressed through her moral behavior.
2. A beautiful voice makes a woman beautiful.
3. Beauty without substance is hollow.
4. Exterior appearance, if too beautiful, can be dangerous: it can hide an evil spirit.
5. Cleanliness is praised.

6. A sound mind, good health and children contribute to one's beauty (it is part of *ewa*).
7. *Ewa*, in the Yoruba aesthetic (the well done), is applied to women and art. *Ewa* has two realities: the outer aspect and the inner one. These have to be combined in harmony to express an aesthetic feeling. The outer aspect applies to the surface quality of things; the inner aspect applies to the character.
8. A woman should be well built, tall, good-looking and well-complexioned (light or dark).
9. The idea of balance in beauty is important. Most Yoruba may see beauty in the mean (i.e. the average person): they prefer the mean to one or the other extreme (ugly or wonderful).
10. Ornaments (jewelry, clothes): if they suit the wearer, they add to her beauty.

#### Textiles:

Women are part of ceremonies in which their body has to be clothed in proper ways, according to the occasion.

#### Some examples of the importance of dress to women include:

1. Rites of passage. For example, Kalabari young women: after several weeks of seclusion, they come out for the ceremony of cloth tying. This precedes the marriage.
2. Each part of a female's rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood is associated with a specific dress or textile.
3. In many cases women commission identical dresses for funerals, if they are members of the same family (men of the same family can have the same outfit, too).
4. Women commission identical dresses to express their belonging to a specific association (Eicher 1995).

## Gendered Art Expressions: Associations and Initiations

Objects are often classified by gender; this is a way to organize the everyday life, religious and political contexts. Objects conceptualize the place of everyone in a symbolic and ideological world. They also define oneself and one's relationship with the group and with the opposite sex. Secret societies like the Poro and the Sande in West Africa define the individual, according to his gender and to the rest of the community. The associations use art objects to make the transformation more concrete. The *njaye* convey the initiation for the Mende in Sierra Leone, and when this is done, they are literally "pulled" from the bush and celebrated, the way the primordial couple could be (as representatives of the human victorious over the wild).

### Women associations:

#### The example of the Sande association:

The mythology explains that women were the first guardians of all the rituals and spiritual powers. They were the keepers of the sacred traditions celebrating the ancestors.

Women had to be initiated and trained for the important tasks of being a wife and a mother. These ceremonies occupied the central place in a community's life. The idea of fertility, associated with women's physiological aptitude to bear children, was extended to the symbol of fertility of the land and of all nature.

Therefore, women have always been considered to be more diligent than men in the specific task of tending ancestral graves. Women are also considered more suited than men for guarding the shrines of the protective spirits of the lands.

### The Sande ritual:

The masked impersonation of *Zogbe*, male water spirit of a lineage, appears in the ritual. The fact that *Zogbe* wanders physically among the audience asserts their lineage. His appearance ensures the continuity of the charter.

### Some characteristics of the Sande association (d'Azevedo 1973: 113):

1. Women are referred as "wives" of *Zogbe*.

2. Human males are not allowed to interfere with any of the demands upon their wives (or female relatives).
3. During the ceremony, women are said to “control the country.”
4. If the chiefdom is extended and populous, there may be several *Zogbe* in session, each of them visiting one group of Sande members.
5. During the ceremony, women neglect their usual household activities to concentrate on the various rituals.
6. Their tasks are related to complex rituals: “cleansing the land,” training initiates, tending ancestral shrines.
7. Initiations take place during the Sande ritual.
8. Masquerades are performed. The masks represent water spirits.

#### The masquerade:

The masquerader appears without speaking: the communication takes place in a language of gesture and dance.

The gender of the masquerader is regarded as feminine, except for the *Gola*, who see in the masquerader the spirit spouse of one woman. This spouse comes to judge and punish transgressions of the Sande laws.

The gender becomes ambiguous when the mask (feminine) and the costume (a man’s attire seen under the costume) are viewed together.

It is important to notice that the *Zogbe* mask, representing a male water spirit, is worn by women. Moreover, women wearing masks is highly unusual in Africa where masks are almost always performed by men.

Sande plays an important political and social role, not only among women but also for the whole community.

Initiation in the “bush school” teaches girls to become wives and mothers, and it identifies the role played by each gender in the community. Sande has specific songs and dances. But the real and concrete passage from girlhood into womanhood takes place through female circumcision (often articulated by men).

Sande, like other ceremonial events, plays the role of a patron: all the ritual and masquerade paraphernalia are commissioned. Here we find an example of women’s patronage.

Male societies:

Poro association:

The Poro association is spread across a number of societies of the Guinea Coast and Western Sudan areas of West Africa.

One explanation for the creation of the Poro association among the Gola people:

According to the mythology, this male society was created after a long period of wars and social instability. Enemies attacked the community and the siege lasted a long time. Women were confident in the power of Sande to find victory in the situation: Sande and the powerful ancestors would protect the community. But men wanted a more rapid end to the situation: the chiefdoms attempted to organize themselves for defense.

The women's position led the men to think that women could not be trusted:

- Women could not understand or cope with a war situation.
- Women would not let the men participate in Sande rituals and kept the secrets of the society.
- Women could not be trusted in the secrets of war.
- Eventually, women would speak out the men's plans to the enemy.

The men looked for a power that would be special to males and their values. They captured a monstrous being in the forest. The importance of the forces of wilderness (opposed to the social organization of the community) is primordial here, this wild being represented the powers of nature, the domain of spirits (nature spirits and ancestral spirits). Its power was therefore useful for the community: it became the Great Spirit Poro.

The men who subdued and tended the being are regarded in the society as the *Dazoa*: the bravest, highest and most sacred officials of the Poro association (the appellation applies also to some of the descendants of their lineage).

Women, of course, are not allowed to be members of the society. They cannot look directly upon the mask representing the great spirit.

Some characteristics of the Poro among the Senufo:

1. The young boys (initiates) are taken out to the forest, where they are in contact only with their peers and with nature. They look to the Ancient Mother deity who will validate all Poro activities.
2. Boys are taught obedience to their elders.
3. They are taught to be strong.
4. They practice the arts of weaponry.
5. They are taught co-operation and absolute loyalty to the Poro.
6. Circumcision is practiced (and explained as part of a process of rebirth).
7. Masquerades take place, as well as rituals. The same masqueraders also perform at funerals.
8. Zoomorphic masks (horizontal and vertical) are used in the masquerades.
9. Some animals are important in the masquerades: the chameleon, for example, is regarded as a sacred primordial animal. His ability to transform himself is a metaphor for the life cycle transitions of initiation and death (Perani & Smith 1998: 66).
10. Fathers are very proud of their sons when they become initiates.

The initiation marks a turn in one's life. The fathers are proud of their sons:

1. It marks an achievement in the son's life: from a boy he is transformed into a man.
2. The father has a new and honorable status in the community; he becomes an elder.

Political role:

Some secret corporate institutions are charged with making important decisions, in the economic, judicial and political areas. This is the case among the Temne, Mende or Gola people of Sierra Leone and Western Liberia, for example. The power of an association goes beyond the rituals in a given age group. The Poro association carries out both political and social functions, and its influence is dictated by the power of spiritual entities.

## **Suggested Lecture Points**

### The role of an association or a society:

Ceremonies and the masquerades performed on particular occasions express the relationships between male and female members of one religious society.

African societies integrate social and religious organizations. Kin groups (nuclear family as well as extended family and lineage) serve as markers for an individual to trace his or her descent. The role of associations and societies organized around same sex and/or same age groups is to carry out important functions in the community (social order, organization, gender roles). All the associations provide patronage for the arts (they commission costumes, ritual objects, masks).

### Associations and secret societies are indispensable organizations in African culture:

1. They are politically and socially powerful.
2. They are organized around ceremonies (recruitment and maintenance of membership).
3. They reinforce ties between genders.
4. They reinforce ties among the members of a community and define their roles.

### Religious associations develop cults centered around:

1. Particular spirits
2. Masquerades (masquerade associations sponsor performances)
3. Initiation (association which educate and socialize young men and women into adults)

African mythology draws gender lines. Some myths define the basic social organization and gender relationships, and tell who has the power. The dichotomy between village and wilderness (humans versus spirits) usually applies also to the gender distinction: women are associated with the village and men are associated with the wilderness.



Specific numbers are attributed to specific gender:

- Number three is attributed to women.
- Number four is attributed to men.

These numbers are not specific to Poro/Sande associations. They represent the supposed number of years in which one gender is given the power, which is subsequently taken over by the opposite sex. The association ceremonies express these processes through their masquerades. The role of the masks is very important in this context (see Topic Two: The Mask and the Masquerade: the example of the gender reversal process in some costumes). Public problems are played out in the cycles of the ceremonies.

The main themes and objectives of these ceremonies (d'Azevedo 1973: 112):

1. Recruit new members
2. Maintain membership
3. Express the unresolved rivalry between genders
4. The ancestors' struggle to ensure the integrity and continuity of the community

The founding myth of these institutions explains why the societies were created, their role in the community and their organization.

### **Using the Davis Collection**

- Two Mossi or Nuna dolls, accession # 1997.28 a-b.
- Female Akan standing figure, accession # 1997.30 b.

## Two Mossi or Nuna dolls

### Description:

Mossi or Nuna, Burkina Faso, Western Sudan. Wood. Two female figures: 7 1/8" and 5 3/4". Handling and use seem evident for these pieces.

### Shared characteristics:

Both figures represent women in a stylized form. Their general shape is long, narrow and cylindrical. The figures are truncated, with no arms. The heads are in a bullet shape. The coiffures show stylized braids.

### The smaller doll:

She has a protruding navel, where vertical and horizontal scarifications meet. The braids are incised and defined. Two beads are tied to her neck.

### The larger doll:

She shares the same style, without the embellishment.

### Use:

These two dolls express the traditional form for this type of figure. They represent the ideal of female beauty: the braids show a neat design, the head reflects dignity and the protruding navel (as well as the breasts) shows the status of a woman who can bear children.

The necklace with the beads indicates wealth, abundance and an important status. The elaborate hairstyle as well shows the important status of this woman.

The lack of facial expression symbolizes composure, elegance and power over one person's feelings.

Care of the object: the figures can be handled by students.

## Female Akan standing figure

### General description:

Female representation. Wood, pigments. Dark red patina. Akan. Cote d'Ivoire. 14".

### The woman's characteristics:

1. The style seems to be Abbron.
2. She has a large head.
3. She stands on a thicker platform than the man.
4. Belts are in relief.
5. Feet are well defined.
6. The surface is polished red-brown.
7. Much handling is evident.
8. Her breasts show her youth.

Care of the object: the figure can be handled with care by students.

## Suggested Questions and Exercises

### Using the slides:

\* Ashanti, Ntan figure:

Woman sitting, giving breast to her baby. This type of figure expresses a woman of respect and high status. Female representations that depict a woman sitting indicate the rank or the status of the woman (a chief's wife, probably) or a mother.

\* Yoruba, female *ibeji* (see the function and meaning of this figure in Topic Seven: Family and Kinship).

1. Describe the two statues and compare their subjects.

2. How do these two figures fit into African aesthetics concerning the representation of the female body? Do these representations fit (or differ) from Western criteria concerning the representation of the female body?
3. Compare the first statue to Western representations of the female:
  - Are there similarities in their subjects?
  - Knowing the meaning and the context of the African statues, compare the way these same ideas are expressed in corresponding Western art forms.
4. Compare representation of the female body and its African aesthetic characteristics (use the characteristics developed in Topic One: Aesthetics) as expressed in the *ibeji* and as exhibited in a contemporary Western fashion magazine (see comparative photos included).
  - What aspects seem similar and/or different (on the levels of both simple description and symbolic content)?
  - Compare also the contemporary African model: discuss how the photograph uses some of the traditional African concepts about women's beauty.

Suggested elements of response:

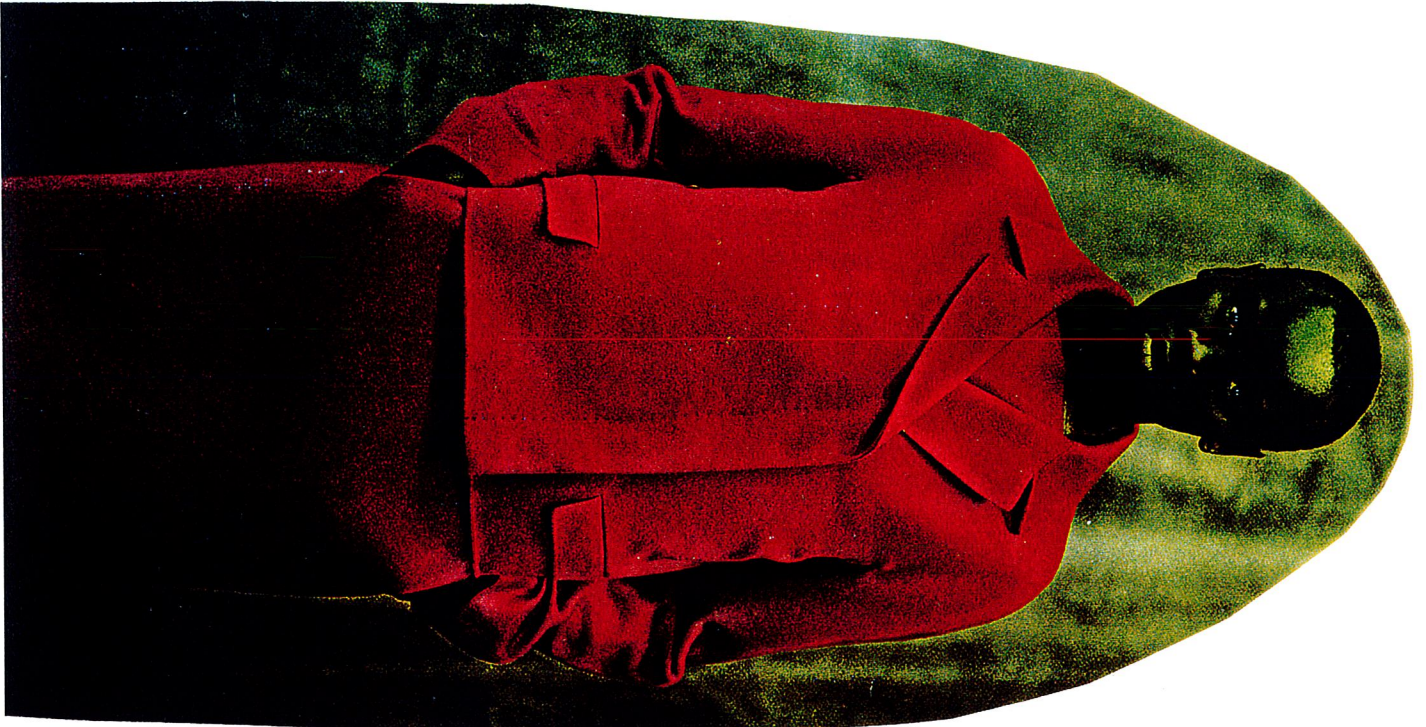
The Western model (in *Vogue* Paris, September 1998):

- The idea of a "top model" in Western conception implies that this person is among the most beautiful of all women. We admire these standards of beauty. The African perception is different: too beautiful may be dangerous and regarded as something bad or to avoid.
- The expression on the face shows no special feeling (parallel with the African representation) but her mouth is slightly open (a sensuous sign for Westerners, however unsuitable in African aesthetics).
- She wears jewelry: both cultures see accessories (here a handbag) and ornaments as devices which add to the beauty of a person.
- Her complexion is perfect.

The African model (in *Elle*, September 1998):

Her face expresses several aspects of African aesthetics:

1. No specific expression
2. Mouth closed



3. Symmetry in the lines
4. The light is directed on her forehead to express luminosity. Her complexion is perfect.
5. The arms are kept along the body.

### **Additional Documentation**

#### Slides that illustrate boys' and girls' initiations:

- \* Temne, Sierra Leone. Boys' initiation. Masquerader in front of the boys.
- \* Temne, Sierra Leone. Boys' initiation. Raffia mask and dress covers the body.
- \* Gola, Sande society.
- \* Women Temne Sande society. The masquerader wears a female mask and a raffia dress. The mask shows a woman's beauty: see the rings on the neck.

#### Slides in illustration of the Egungun festival (secret organized cult):

See Topic Two: the Mask and the Masquerade for a relation with masquerades.

#### Slides in illustration of the Gelede masquerade (association):

See Topic Two: the Mask and the Masquerade.

Read also: Smith, Fred and Perani, Judith, "Gelede/Efe Masquerade," in *Africa. Gender, Power, and Life Cycle Rituals*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1998, pp. 150- 152.

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## Topic Seven: Family and Kinship

### **Major Focus: the Family**

Family, Household, Kinship

Spirit Spouses

Ancestral Figures

### **Suggested Lecture Points**

Visualizing the Supernatural

### **Using the Davis Collection**

The *Ibeji* Figure

Pair of Akan Standing Figures

### **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

### **Supplementary Readings**

### **Bibliography**

### **Major Focus: the Family**

### **Family, Household, Kinship**

Definitions useful for understanding the African concept of family links, compared to Western concept:

#### Family:

The family is “a group composed of a woman, her dependent children, and at least one adult man joined through marriage or blood relationship” (Haviland 1999: 259). The form of the family is defined and related to specific social, historical, and ecological factors. This type of family is not universal, but most of the families represent the basic core of the household (Haviland 1999: 269).

#### Household:

This is the basic residential unit where universal concepts are organized and implemented (Haviland 1999: 269):

1. Economic production
2. Consumption
3. Inheritance
4. Child rearing
5. Shelter

Many of the households are defined physically by one or a group of houses (compound), and most households constitute a family.

### Kinship:

Family relationship: the state of being kin, who can trace or claim descent from a common ancestor (real or mythical) within a given group (family, clan, tribe).

In Africa, one can find different types of descent groups - a way of organizing a society along kinship lines (Haviland 1999: 288):

1. Unilineal descent: group membership is established exclusively through either the father's or the mother's line
2. Matrilineal: group membership is established exclusively through the mother's line
3. Patrilineal: group membership is established exclusively through the father's line

The two last kinship structures define basic organization of most African societies.

The family unit and descent structures are very important concepts in African culture. Therefore, when there is a dysfunction or a specific need inside the structure, solutions have to be found to restore the unity of the system.

We will discuss two aspects of the "extended family" (i.e. extended to sculptures as members of the family) through the examples of the spirit spouses and the *ibeji* figure.

### **Spirit Spouses**

The Baule people of Cote d'Ivoire express the private **ownership of art** through a

specific type of sculpture, the spirit spouse. These wood figurines represent the **relation of the individual to the spiritual world**.

Among the Baule, everyone is supposed to have a spirit spouse in the other world, in addition to the actual spouse. When a spirit spouse appears in a dream, the human spouse commissions a carved figure representing the spirit spouse.

The statue is treated with respect:

1. It receives offerings.
2. It is bathed and rubbed with oil.
3. It is clothed.

The relationship between owner and the spirit spouse is very strong:

1. He or she treats the figure like a real human being.
2. The owner communicates with the spirit spouse through dreams.
3. Each spirit spouse has its own personality, like a real human being.
4. It is important that the owner takes good care of the figure, because the spirit spouse can become angry or jealous.

Spirit spouses have specific powers:

1. They have to look beautiful to be effective.
2. They help the owner with fertility problems.
3. The statue offers an effective way of dealing with marital problems.
4. This particular art form can be owned by both genders and handled in the same way, in order to receive the same supernatural benefits.

Although everyone knows who owns a spirit spouse, **nobody speaks about him or her** among the group. The spirit spouses are owned by individuals and kept at home.

Baule have a **strong sense of individual ownership and of privacy**. They do not show their spirit spouses in public (when they carry them, they hide them in their wrappers). They believe that thieves would steal the figures because they are beautiful.

The aesthetic aspect of the spirit spouse is important, both to please the taste of the owner and to enhance the effectiveness of the figure.

Spirit spouses show all the refinement of Baule's traditional ideal of beauty:

1. The representation is almost naturalistic.
2. It has refined physical characteristics: elongated neck, downcast eyes, clear and refined facial features, strong calves (for both male and female).
3. Spirit spouses have elaborate coiffures and textured designs finely incised to represent scarifications.
4. Most of the figures are polished rounded forms.
5. Female representations have ample pelvic girdle and breasts.
6. The hands are placed on the abdomen.
7. The figures are often polychrome.

### **Ancestral figures**

**Power and effectiveness and extended kinship** are the main characteristics of the spirit spouses. **Carved ancestral figures** also fit these characteristics.

There are no representations of the supreme being in African art, but there are images of the sons of the god. The **progenitors of a lineage**, once human, are considered spirits and represented in carved figures.

Here are some of their characteristics:

1. The figures are symbols. They are the seats of supernatural power: the power is given to the living through the ancestor. The power has to be activated by rituals, performed by specialists.
2. The figures rarely represent frightening beings: they are almost always pleasing, for the ancestor is a good and helpful friend who gives protection and blessing.
3. Their shape is of non-realistic being.
4. However, the head is accentuated: it represents the seat of intellectual power (and the site of the vital forces in general).

5. The navel is often accentuated: it represents the center of life and the relation between mother and child.
6. Decorations are elaborate: various coiffures, tattoo markings and emblems (these marks not only express aesthetic values, but they also enable the ancestor to recognize his figure).
7. Narrow slits often represent the eyes: this enables the ancestor to see and act.
8. The figures are treated as members of the family. Often when there is a celebration, they are adorned with beads and rubbed with oil. People dance for them, perform sacrifices or libations to enhance the ancestor's vitality.

The ancestral figure can be a **female representation**: the mother of all things is respected for having the power to give help regarding **fertility and marital problems**. This figure is invoked in all stages of **agricultural cycle**, again as an expression of fertility (although these concepts are not female specific).

Ancestral figures express **group pride**. In the case of large statues representing the founder of the community, the figure is **communal property** of the village. A priest takes care of the statue, which is kept in a **shrine** and taken out to the village for ceremonies.

Some figures are private property and are kept inside the home, where they occupy a place of honor. Private ancestor figures are personal protective figures. When the owner dies, the figure is often buried with the deceased. The figures are taken out of the house for ceremonies, through which they are "charged" again with the forces of life.

## **Suggested Lecture points**

### **Visualizing the supernatural**

African art has developed a large array of visual forms to **express in a concrete way the abstraction** of the spiritual world. By doing this, humans **give life to the world of spirits**. This art form enables the humans to have some **access** to the spiritual world, to **communicate** with it and to **control** it.

These visual forms include (Hackett 1996: 56):

1. Statues
2. Carved posts
3. Altars
4. Household items: stools, pots, textiles
5. Masks

In the case of the spirit spouses:

The art form expresses **contrast between** the disorder of nature or **wilderness** and the physical and moral qualities of the **village**, which is organized. The Baule call the spirit spouses “human beings”; by doing so, they express in the everyday life the existing **link between the human and the spiritual world**.

In the case of the ancestral figures:

The ancestral figure represents the past (**history**) of one lineage (a family or a larger group). The figure enables both sides (humans and spirit) to **communicate**. But the figure also represents the present for the group: the ancestor embodied by the figure can come back to the village and **behave like a human being** (in other words as “civilized,” in contrast to its “wild” status as a spirit).

Among the Igbo, for example, some ancestors are able to come back. This is the case for particular ancestors who have achieved high status and recognition. Divination enables the ancestor to communicate with the living in order to ask to be “born again” into one family. The carving of a figure, which is placed in the lineage house (Hackett 1996: 67), marks the act of being born again.

### **Using the Davis Collection**

- *Ibeji* figure, accession # 1997.29
- Pair of Akan standing figures, accession # 1997.30 a-b

## The *ibeji* figure

### General description:

Yoruba male *ibeji*, Nigeria. Wood, blue pigments, camwood. 9 ¾".

- Facial details: large eyes, lashes defined, and tribal scarifications.
- Coiffure: pointed, decorated with patterns of diagonal lines and rubbed with indigo and bluing.
- Legs: short, defined feet. The figure stands on a round platform.
- Arms: along the body.
- The body is rubbed with camwood.
- Facial expression: the eyes show no emotion. The *ibeji* reflects the Yoruba aesthetic of being master of one's feelings.

Care of the object: students can handle the *ibeji*; picture and slide are also available.

### Cultural context:

The *ibeji* is a twin figure and can be male or female.

The Yoruba have a high rate of twin births. Twins are considered blessed children and owners of a special supernatural power. Unfortunately, there are also a lot of infant deaths. Therefore, when somebody loses a twin, a statue replaces the deceased. The *ibeji* symbolizes the link between the twins.

The Yoruba have an elaborate ritual to give a child a name. Each name is private and has a link with the spiritual world, thus expressing their idea of the uniqueness of an individual. Through the rituals, this individual responds also to his strong relationship with the community.

Even if each person is private, there is a moment when the person may appear double: in the case of twins. Twins have special powers, through all of Africa. In Yoruba art they are represented as the figures called *ibeji*. The two children are believed to share a single soul. Though each twin has an individual identity. But they never separate. That is why the *ibeji* is commissioned when one of the twins dies. The *ibeji* represents the dead child but, while it reflects stylistic variation, it does not show the personal characteristics of the deceased.

The family (usually the surviving twin) takes care of the figure as it were the real child. The person in charge treats the figure like a living person: the figure is fed, bathed, clothed and even taken on journeys by the mother (in the case of small figurines). Songs sung by the mothers of twins praise twins.

In this way, the special powers of both children always protect the family. This is an example of private ownership that brings prosperity to a whole group as well as psychological equilibrium to the surviving twin, and for the mother it is a safe way to mourn the lost child. Private ownership of this particular figure implies also a very strong personal relationship between living and dead.

The *ibeji* figure usually stays inside the house, but can be taken outside, in the twin's (or mother's) wrapper, for ceremonies. When the owner (or better: the guardian) dies, the *Ifa* diviner consults the *ibeji* to know if it has to be buried with the person who died or if another member of the family will take care of it.

#### Spiritual powers of the *ibeji*:

The *ibeji* is believed to be the container of the potentially dangerous spirit.

Shango, the god of thunder and lightning, protects twins. Therefore, twins share the psychological characteristics of Shango: they may use their power in capricious manners. If this power is not placated, it can be dangerous for the surviving twin (and even for the entire family). This explains why the mother or the surviving twin takes care of the *ibeji*.

Ceremonies and rituals are performed to celebrate the deceased twin's birthday. *Ibejis* are also taken out in the village for special ceremonies.

#### Some characteristics of Yoruba aesthetics are represented in the *ibeji* of the Collection:

See also Topic one: Aesthetics, for some information on the aspects of Yoruba aesthetics as illustrated by the *ibeji*.

#### The head and its symbolism:

The head, both in sculpture and in real life, is very important in Yoruba's tradition. It represents the very concept of individuality.

The head in general is the place of the vital forces, and is the most important part of a figure. This explains the size of the head compared to the rest of the body. The head (*ori*) represents as well the nature of one's person: inside the head is the site of



one's essential nature - the superior quality of self-control - while the exterior reflects beauty. This latter concept (the face especially), as an expression of the "inner head" (*ori onu*), has to reflect dignity and calm.

This can be found in the statuary: the faces have no particular expression and everything is well proportioned and balanced (symmetry is a current feature and aesthetic principle in African art in general).

In the meantime, it maintains a cultural bond between individuals, between individuals and their history or lineage, and between individuals and the community. The idealized lines of Yoruba human figure carving speak about the importance of the individual by means of likeness. To own a figure is to know where you belong. This is far from the Western approach to art.

#### The red color of the camwood:

Red is one of the basic triad color schemes in Africa, along with black and white. The use of the color red as both aesthetic and symbolic statement belongs to the symbolic and aesthetic systems of different cultures and varies with these different cultures. The symbolism of the color red is found all over Africa: red is commonly associated with blood. Blood itself can mean death or life, according to differences of interpretation.

The *ibeji* in the Davis Collection is rubbed with camwood. Here the red color may represent the idea of death since the *ibeji* represents the deceased twin. But it also suggests the idea of "giving life" to the spirit through the red color, an idea sustained by the fact that the *ibejis* are treated like living people.

#### General stylistic features of an *ibeji*:

1. *Ibeji* figures usually stand on bases.
2. They are represented as standing human beings, with the arms at the side.
3. They are generally carved nude; their gender is clearly indicated although gender is sometimes indicated by dress.
4. Styles vary from region to region. Sometimes the style of one particular artist may be identified.
5. Scarifications vary from one city/region to another.
6. Variations in style do not affect personal characteristics of the deceased twin, for the figure is not meant literally to represent a true likeness of the twin.

7. If the *ibej* wears beads, there may be a variation in the type and the colors of the beads, which represent affiliation to religious or professional organizations.

Two examples of bead ornaments and their symbolism:

- In the case of a death of a royal twin, the *ibej* is ornate with a special beaded garment, ordered from the crown maker.
- Some *ibej*s wear black waist beads. This ornament is meant to protect children from the spirit of children born to die.

**Pair of Akan standing figures**

General description:

Male and female representations. Wood, pigments. Dark red patina on the female figure. Akan. Cote d'Ivoire. Male: 13 ½". Female: 14".

Care of the object: students can handle the figures with care.

The man:

1. The figure shows symmetry.
2. The scarifications show only one line on each cheek.
3. The navel is protruding.
4. He stands straight, with his arms along the body and hands on hips.
5. The legs are short and slightly bent, and he stands on a base.
6. He wears an elaborate coiffure.
7. The face shows no particular expression.

The woman:

1. The style seems to be Abon.
2. She has a large head.

3. She stands on a thicker platform than the man does.
4. Belts are in relief.
5. Feet are well defined.
6. The surface is a polished red-brown.
7. This figure shows much handling.
8. Her breasts show her youth.

Function:

These figures are spirit mates.

### **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

Use the following selection of figurines from the Davis Collection, without giving any indication about the origin or the use of the object (suggested elements of response follow the accession numbers):

- One of the two Mossi or Nuna dolls (accession # 1997. 28 a-b). Not an *ibej*: the figure is too stylized and not well defined (no arms). May have been carved for tourist trade.
- "Mr. One Leg" Yaka charm (accession # 1997.31). Not an *ibej*: The leg is missing and there is an evident use of ritual rubbing. See Topic Three: The Arts of Religion and Rituals.
- One of the two brass figures: brass couple, Western Sudan (accession # 1997.22 a-b). Not an *ibej*: *ibej*s come only in wood.
- If not used previously: one of the two Akan standing figures (accession # 1997.30 a-b). Not an *ibej*: see the explanation above.

Question to students:

According to the study of the *ibej* figure and its meaning, determine whether or not these figures are *ibej*s and why (this question deals with family: do not include style/aesthetic criteria).

Discussion: compare how African and Western cultures cope with the loss of a child. What are the major behavioral or artistic expressions of the respective cultures?

Suggested elements of response:

- Mourning versus keeping the deceased alive
- Westerners tend to see death as an end to active family ties; Africans live everyday with the deceased

### **Supplementary Readings**

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Smith, Fred and Perani, Judith, *Africa. Gender, Power, and Life Cycle Rituals*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1998.

Vogel, Susan M., *African Art Western Eyes*, Yale University Art Gallery, Yale University Press, London, 1997 (book accompanying the exhibition on Baule art).

## Topic Eight: Change Processes

### **Major Focus: Evolution in Art**

Cultural Changes

### **Suggested Exercises**

### **Reflection on Tradition and Change in African Art**

### **Suggested Exercises**

### **Using the Davis Collection**

Lot of Four Senufo *Kpelle* Masks

Leopard with Prey

### **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

### **Supplementary Readings**

### **Bibliography**

### **Major Focus: Evolution in Art**

This section will focus on the evolution and/or transformation of traditional art in the larger context of cultural changes. The Suggested Lecture Point has been deliberately integrated into the Major Focus. This will allow the teachers to observe various aspects of change processes, in order to open up the topic to broader concepts that may fit specific courses outside of Anthropology.

### **Cultural Changes**

#### Why do cultures change?

There are numerous reasons why a culture changes.

Deliberate choice:

1. Some aspects of one culture changes **in response to a problem**: famine or war that forces people to move from one area to another, exodus from villages to big cities in search of work are two examples.
2. The **contact with other cultures** may introduce new ideas, behaviors and values.

Forced change:

1. **Conquest**
2. **Genocide**
3. **Imposition** of foreign values and political/economical organization (the “Western example” shown all over the world on TV, for example)
4. **Political supremacy** inducing dependency of one culture on another (colonies and dominions, for example)
5. **Directed change** (military displacement of a population with no concern about culture)
6. **Adaptation to foreign markets** (fabrication of “traditional” objects with Western flair)
7. **Immigration**

Through change, cultures usually **adapt**. Not all changes, however, are necessarily adaptive.

There are basically two forms of change (Haviland 1999: 447):

1. **Primary innovation**: the chance discovery of a new principle. This principle may bring rapid cultural change. Primary innovation stimulates new inventions.
2. **Secondary innovation**: something new that results from the deliberate application of known principles (this approximates Western culture’s model of change).

## How do Cultures Change?

### The mechanisms of change and their consequences:

1. **Innovation**
2. **Diffusion** (the borrowing of cultural elements from one society by members of another)
3. **Cultural loss** (often accompanied by loss of identity, on the individual level); the loss can be partial or almost total.
4. **Acculturation** (especially in the case of colonization)
5. **Syncretism**, occurring in case of acculturation. Syncretism blends indigenous and foreign traits to form a new system.

Usually the **change is accepted** when an innovation shows its **superiority** to the prior method or object. **Prestige** also plays a big role: the change will take place more rapidly if the innovator and/or the recipient group gain prestige through the process.

### Some Definitions:

#### Acculturation:

The process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group, especially a dominant one, and the restructuring or blending of cultures resulting from this.

#### Modernization:

This concept has an ethnocentric implication since it implies that traditional non-industrial societies seek the progress of "advanced" societies.

The changes are part of a global process, involving cultural and socio-economic "progress."

Four major processes are involved:

1. Technological development
2. Industrialization
3. Agricultural development
4. Urbanization

Traditional:

Tradition, in a modernizing society, represents the old or indigenous cultural practices that may oppose new differentiation (Haviland 1999: 468).

The concept is very difficult to define, for each culture defines what is traditional or not.

### **Suggested Exercises**

- Give some examples of innovations (primary and secondary).
- Give some examples of diffusion (they may come from history or from contemporary situations).

### **Reflection on Tradition and Change in African Art**

Tourist art:

Tourist art can be defined as follows:

1. It is a contemporary art form (produced in indigenous cultures only since European contact).
2. It can express a contemporary Western art form (fashion design or canvas painting as opposed to traditional masks, for example).
3. It is produced locally.



4. It is produced for consumption by outsiders to the culture.
5. It can draw from traditional forms, revitalize a specific style or combine various artistic conventions.
6. It may adapt to the outsider's demand (in terms of style, materials or aesthetics).

#### The tourist artist:

The artist gains a status that is different from the traditional status of the artist:

- The traditional artist is recognized for his or her skills but the artwork is usually anonymous.
- In the case of tourist art, objects are often signed by the artist. This fits the Western idea of an artist and seems to "authenticate" an object for a foreign buyer, but it is not a reference for indigenous people.

Tourist art objects are produced for their **economic value**. They have **no other value** in terms of function, meaning or power for the indigenous people. The new objects sometimes partially reflect the traditional model, but are not used as such. Because they are usually produced in big quantities, the artist cannot go into much detail. Therefore, he or she will not express the whole aesthetic statement necessary to the empowerment of a traditional art object.

The new form of art acquires a **shifting symbolic value**: it does not represent the real traditional form for the artist, but it provides an **income**. Even if the object is not traditional in the indigenous ideal, it seems authentic to the tourist-consumer, because it is **produced locally and with traditional methods and materials**.

Some examples applied to the shift in symbolism (using examples developed under the preceding topics):

#### Textiles:

- **Traditional weaving and indigo dying** in Africa has become a good source of income for local artists. Indigo cloth is created by young fashion designers, who have sometimes studied in Europe.

Traditional cloth is replaced with an **industrial woven cotton**, dyed in indigo color. This may be real indigo dye or **imported chemical dyes**. The designs may be traditional or contemporary interpretations of traditional motifs.

The cloth is sold in the market places to local people who want to be fashionable (in big cities) or to foreigners.

Batik cloth using wax resist dying is another example of change in traditional art.

- In the Davis Collection, the *Korhogo narrow strip cotton weave of Cote d'Ivoire* (accession # 1997.46) is a good example of textile made for commercial purposes. It uses the narrow strip-weaving technique with figures painted on the cloth. The figures depict "traditional" masked dancers. Traditionally, there is no such depiction. The object combines traditional and contemporary aspects. The technique is traditional but figurative decorations have replaced the geometric non-representational motifs of the past.

#### Raffia mats:

These mats are traditionally reserved for Shoowa leaders and show their **prestige** (see Topic Four: Power, Prestige, Politics).

The new mats on the market do not reflect the tradition: their design is often simple and fits Western tastes. These designs, as well as the lower technical quality of the mat (the traditional ones are finely executed), cannot fit the traditional ideal of prestige.

#### Masks:

Masks are among **the most widely and frequently sold** art objects in tourist markets.

Traditionally, a mask has an **important function in the community** (see Topic Two: The Mask and the Masquerade). The mask represents supernatural powers; it is a **power object**. The mask is used in ceremonies and rituals only. Individuals do not own a mask (except for shamans or leaders). Traditional masks adhere to strict and elaborate criteria in order to be **efficient**.

Masks made for the trade have **simpler designs** or present contemporary additions. They may be more stylized and more abstract than traditional ones. Foreigners buy them because they usually **fit Western tastes**.

The masks sold in marketplaces have **no meaning and no use for indigenous people**. They do not have significant cultural meaning for the consumer, either. Instead of the traditional use in masquerades, the mask will often end on the wall of a collector. The object becomes a museum item, judged by the Western aesthetic ideal.

Often commercial masks are **smaller** than the traditional ones (such as the large butterfly masks or the vertical masks of the Davis Collection), in order to fit in a suitcase.

### The arts of religion and rituals

#### Masks:

Masks made for the tourist market reflect cultural change in the arts of religion and rituals.

We have seen that traditional masks are power objects used in ceremonies and rituals. But they have another specificity, lost in commercial mask forms. In order to be recognized as a power object, they have to **go through specific rituals**, during and right after they are carved.

"Tourist masks," because they are not to be used in ceremonies, are not legitimized and authenticated through rituals, and therefore have no value in the eyes of the indigenous culture.

#### Shrines:

Shrines are **not reproduced for the foreign trade**, because they can take various forms (see Topic Three: The Arts of Religion and Rituals) inconsistent with Western aesthetics.

Cultural changes can, however, be seen in the objects and **materials** used for contemporary forms of shrines. We saw that a traditional shrine can be a pot (clay or calabash). It is not uncommon to see contemporary shrines made with a metal or a **plastic** bowl.

**Offerings** are given on traditional shrines. Contemporary offerings often include money, cigarettes and alcohol. Western alcoholic beverages often replace traditional libations of water or palm wine.

#### The *ibeji*:

The traditional *ibeji* is carved by a skilled artist and adorned with beadwork or a traditional coiffure. The tradition is still very much alive, but sometimes one can see contemporary expressions of the *ibeji*, like photographs (especially among Christians and Muslims). The photograph of the surviving twin is printed twice. If the twins

were not of the same gender, the surviving twin has to dress once in a male outfit and once in a female outfit.

Use the slide:

\* Young woman carrying a baby in the back: the “contemporary *ibeji*” is a white Western plastic doll carried in the wrapper.

Is this a sign of acculturation?

Spirit spouses:

Recently, Baule figures appeared dressed in European outfits. This is actually an indigenous response to modernization. People use these modern spirit spouses in the traditional sense. The tradition is preserved, but it expresses an evolution, a cultural change in the way spirit spouses are perceived: they are not only portrayed in their physical characteristics, they follow modern life and fashion.

## **Suggested Exercises**

Use the slides:

Try to find the cultural changes and the relation to tradition in the following contemporary African art objects:

\* Nigeria, modern painting: “Ogogoro man in an intoxicated dream” by Nigerian artist Twins Seven-Seven.

Suggested analysis:

- The colors: red, white, black are traditional but the topic and the medium are contemporary
- Unlike traditional forms, modern art works allow multiple interpretations. For example, there are a lot of wild animals in this painting. This traditional pattern is used in a contemporary context: through his intoxication (the artist may denounce the problem of alcoholism in big cities) the man dreams of wild animals. The symbol seems clear: intoxication destroys the humane quality of the man and he enters the world of the non-civilized (wilderness).

- The dream: he communicates with the wilderness (animals as mediators) through a dream. This theme comes from traditional ritual practices.

\* Nigeria, modern painting by Nigerian artist Yusuf Grillo: "The Drummer's Return."

Suggested analysis:

- Modern medium
- Modern expression: Western abstract form
- The title evokes traditional ceremonies

\* Yoruba, painting by Nigerian artist Muraina Oyelami: "Ajantala, the Forest Spirit" (in Beier, *Contemporary Art in Africa*, p. 100).

Suggested analysis:

- Contemporary art form and medium
- The title evokes the traditional cosmology

\* Four carved figures, Congo area, 19th century tourist art.

\* Painted truck, Nigeria.

## Using the Davis Collection

- Lot of four Senufo *Kpelle* masks, accession # 1997.19 a-d
- Leopard with prey, accession # 1997.24

### Lot of four Senufo *Kpelle* masks

Description:

Western Sudan, Senufo. Cast brass. All of these masks come from traditional brass casting centers.

Care of the object: these masks can be handled in class. Slide and picture available.

Common features:

They all have angular projections at the level of the ears: the three smallest ones wear semi-circular ear-like shapes. Thin braid-like appendages extend from the sides of the chin. All, except the largest, have narrow slit eye openings.

Differences: all have different crests:

- 8.75": tall central crest with small appendage to the side
- 9": upward and inward curving blade-like horns
- 9.25": flat semi-circular crest with openwork diamond
- 12": large median braid. It is less refined than the others are.

Use:

These masks are called "tourist pieces." They reflect the indigenous traditional Senufo style of woodcarving but are made to fit (more or less) Western tastes. The tourists can take them in their luggage easily, due to the small size of the masks. The masks are made for the outside market trade, not for a specific traditional use. They won't be used in rituals or other ceremonial events among the Senufo. The three smallest ones, however, resemble traditional Senufo masks in wood and metal.

Traditional Senufo masks: they are made of carved and shiny black wood.

Their general features are:

1. Lateral ornaments
2. Delicately carved features
3. Tiny protuberant mouth
4. Long, thin nose
5. Heart-shaped brow line

The traditional crests (Perani & Smith 1998: 66):

1. Crest in the form of the Bombax-thorn motif or hornbill bird (one of the five primordial Senufo animals) projecting from the forehead
2. Extensions off the bottom of the mask: they may represent stylized earrings (item borrowed from a neighboring masking tradition)
3. Horns: the flattened pair of curved horns may be those of a buffalo

The Senufo masks are used in performances, in Poro association ceremonies. They represent male and female spirits and are performed, along with the Kponyugu masks (zoomorphic vertical masks), to express the complementary roles of men and women in Senufo society.

See Topic Six: Gender Issues, for a link to associations.

### **Leopard with prey**

#### Description:

Western Sudan. Bwa. Cast brass. 8 ¼ x 3 ¼".

A leopard holds an antelope in his jaws. Both predator and prey are males.

- The leopard: the head seems slightly unequally proportioned with the body. The eyes seem to be closed. He wears an undulating design behind his head. The tail of the leopard is slightly curved upward towards his back.
- The antelope: the horns curve upwards.

#### Use:

The leopard is a decorative sculpture. The figure expresses a traditional charm motif, but it lacks other traditional details and is oversized. This piece is made for the tourist trade. It can be easily stored in luggage. The naturalistic look is appealing for the buyer, but has no particular meaning in a traditional Western Sudan context.

Traditionally, this kind of art demonstrates a ruler's power and authority, symbolized by the power of the leopard. The prey may symbolize the common people (therefore the statue may express a social perspective).

Care of the object: only the instructor should handle the object: the metal is corroding, especially around the head of the leopard.

## **Suggested Questions and Exercises**

Using the Senufo masks of the Collection:

How does the transition between traditional and commercial take place?

Suggested elements of response:

- \* The traditional masks are shiny while the commercial ones express the "shiny" aspect through the new material (brass).
- \* The masks are made of brass, making them more durable.
- \* The brass makes an implied reference to a more prestigious metal, gold, used by traditional rulers in Africa. It appeals more to the Western buyer.

Compare art objects:

Take some traditional art forms from Western culture (or from other cultures, for international students) and compare them to their modern adaptation. What are the differences, the transformations in the appearance and/or in the meaning? Can we still call the modern version "traditional"?

Suggested example: the lights on the Christmas tree.

\* Tradition:

The fir tree is the only tree that keeps its green color during winter time in Northern Europe (where the tradition started).

The lights represent the day gradually coming back after the long winter nights. Originally these celebrations were not linked, but the candles appeared on the tree at Christmas time.

\* Modern version:

The plastic tree and electric light garlands. The custom has spread all over the world (you can find fir trees in India) but the tree has lost his meaning.



The idea conveyed by the lights seems lost too: electric garlands decorate not only the tree but also the houses in North America. This last adaptation may have a link with the original idea of lightening up the winter nights!

Discussion:

Find some examples of Western traditions that have lost their original meaning and/or function (explain what the original meaning was and what transformations have occurred).

Suggestion: the discussion may open to larger themes such as:

1. The loss of cultural identity (in a general sense)
2. The idea of "global culture"
3. The loss (or the adaptation) of one's culture, in the case of immigrants (assimilation process)
4. Is tradition immutable?

## **Supplementary Readings**

Anderson, R.L., "Art in Transition," in *Art in Small-Scale Societies*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1989.

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*of Africa*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1998, pp. 166-170.

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Jules-Rosette, Benetta, *The Message of Tourist Art*, Plenum Press, New York, 1984.

Perani J., and Smith F.T., *The Visual Arts of Africa*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1998.

Roberts, Allen D., *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*, New York, 1995.

**Video:** video on the *Kuba Kings*.

## Suggested List of Additional Topics

These topics can be developed by faculty to fit specific courses. The topics may also be options for student research papers.

Suggested objects from the Davis Collection illustrate each topic.

### Music

- 1997.34a-d Four Nuna/Bwa prestige hunting whistles, Burkina Faso
- 1997.35 Balophone and beaters, Western Sudan
- 1997.36 Malinke/Bamana clapper, Mali
- 1997.37 Friction drum, Guinea Coast (Nigeria? Liberia?)
- 1997.38 Pair of dance anklets with bells, Western Sudan
- 1997.39 Holo thumb piano, "*Sanza*," S. Congo

### Animal representations

- 1997.4 Plank mask, Bwa owl face, Western Sudan
- 1997.5 Plank mask, serpentine superstructure, Western Sudan
- 1997.6 Antelope headcrest, *Kurumba* style, Western Sudan
- 1997.9 Buffalo headcrest, Bwa style, Western Sudan
- 1997.10 Bovine headcrest, Western Sudan
- 1997.23 Hyena, Western Sudan
- 1997.25a-b Two chameleons, Lobi

## **Household Items**

- 1997.48      Mug, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo
- 1997.49      Mortar, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo
- 1997.56      Dogon granary door, Mali

## **The Arts of the Everyday Life**

- 1997.57      Akan comb
- 1997.27a-c    Three "*kissi pennies*" / country money, Guinea, Liberia

## **Basketry Art**

- 1997.50      Box as skeumorph of basket, Kuba, Kasai River region, Congo
- 1997.51a-b    Basketry, Lele (?), and Two small basket sections, Yaka (?)

## **Weapons**

- 1997.52      Kuba pear-shaped iron blade, wood handle
- 1997.53      Bamun sword, wood handle, fiber embellished sheath and straps, Cameroon
- 1997.54      Pende chief's staff as spear, Congo/Zaire
- 1997.55      Spear for hunting hippo, Uganda
- 1997.58      Slingshot as stylized ram, Gouro (?)

## **General Conclusion to the Handbook**

African arts cover a large range of concepts, values and objects. They can be objects or rituals, express tradition or reflect cultural changes.

This handbook applies several aspects of African art to different topics, all linked to African culture and open to a broader, cross-cultural approach to art.

The reflections are based on the first topic, dedicated to the notion of aesthetics, both in Africa and in the Western sense. The ritual aspects of artistic expression as well as the arts of religion are observed. The link between spirituality and power, prestige and politics is also seen through art. The mask and textile items serve as examples, but also as artistic expression themselves. A more cultural analysis is seen in the gender issues and the family and kinship topics, areas where African art is expressed as well. Finally, the handbook opens a discussion on change processes and to reflections on tradition and change in art.

The handbook is not intended to reduce reflection to a comparison between Western and African art, but should lead students to discover and consider other art forms. The goal of this reflection on the Allen Davis Collection of African art is to open students' perception of art to a cross-cultural analysis. The handbook aims to help students think about other cultures from a non-ethnocentric perspective.